

## IMAGINED HISTORIES: BIOGRAPHY, FICTION, AND THE CHALLENGES OF HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

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What we imagine, like what we remember, represents a good part of what we are and a good part of what we will become.

—Tim O'Brien<sup>1</sup>

There is Indiana Jones, the adventuring archaeologist clad in his trademark fedora, wielding both his trusty whip and a mischievous smile. He is looking down at my America in the Twentieth Century course from the projected image of a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* theatrical poster, revealing to my students who, in part, I am. I proceed to tell my students that the very first profession I desired to pursue was, like my childhood hero in the blockbuster 1981 film, archaeology. But after researching what life as an archaeologist was really like, the punch line concludes, I turned to a much more exciting field: that of modern American history. I open the first class meeting of every semester with my own self-deprecating biography, discussing my upbringing in a Midwestern Rust Belt city famous for its history of depressing sports disappointments, my experiences of being drawn to the exotic pictures of *National Geographic* at an early age, what it was like coming of age at the end of the Cold War, and (somewhat embarrassingly) my childhood obsessions with the films of George Lucas, particularly the original *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* trilogies, which taught me about storytelling and took my imagination to far-away places. Our own pasts matter, I tell my students, whether we are the most famous of people or more anonymous historical actors.

I have always been drawn to biography—indeed I imagine that most historians in their formative years were—and decided that I wanted to experiment with a unique biographical pedagogy in my America in the Twentieth Century course to better connect students with the past. Historians, of course, often use biography in their classes.<sup>2</sup> My courses have certainly integrated biographies—throughout my more than ten years in the classroom I have taught many classics such as *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—and biography remains a vital way in which Americans connect with their past. Visiting any bookstore, I see shelves of volumes on the nation's most iconic actors prominently displayed. A recent perusal of

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<sup>1</sup>Tim O'Brien, "The Whole Story," in *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 345.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Kim Nielsen, "Using Biography to Teach Disability History," *OAH Magazine of History* (July 2009), 41–43. Also see the entire issue devoted to teaching biography in the *OAH Magazine of History* 20 (January 2006) as well as the various essays in the AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography, *American Historical Review* 114 (June 2009).

The *New York Times* bestseller list reveals several biographies, including Lynne Cheney's *James Madison* and Scott Eyman's *John Wayne*. Hollywood loves biography too, as three of the last four winners of the Academy Award for Best Picture, including the phenomenal *Twelve Years a Slave*, were biopics.

As with biography, I have also always been drawn to fiction, usually fiction with a strong sense of time and place. I resist the label of historical fiction, as I believe that all fiction—even fantasy and science fiction—is historical, set in a specific time and place. The genre of historical fiction—popular works from Philippa Gregory on Tudor and Stuart England come to mind—usually chronicles the lives of notable historic actors, though I see such a definition as confining. John Updike's *Rabbit* novels, for example, are certainly historical and tell us much about the experiences of normal Americans in the post-World War II era. During my youth I loved to read about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, and the tales of Robert Louis Stevenson, amongst many others. I was always drawn to adventure narratives, though a strong sense of place and character were important to my developing imagination. I decided to organize my course around biographies, but with a twist: along with historical biographies, we would also be exploring imagined biographies in films and novels.

I have traditionally asked students in my upper-level courses to engage in some sort of research assignment, typically a longer paper that asks them to craft an argument based on research into primary and secondary sources. What I have begun to notice, however, is that throughout these assignments there is often a lack of depth, with more general reportage rather than analysis largely dominating the papers. What if, I pondered, this course focused not on a chronological, thematic, or topical approach, but rather on biographies both real and imagined? What if, instead of producing a standard research paper on a historical figure, students were asked to create an *imagined* biography, a fictional account of a life based on primary and secondary sources? And, ultimately, I asked, how can biography—particularly imagined lives—help us to better understand the human experience? My students were asked to combine history and fiction, a difficult yet potentially rewarding task. What I found throughout this experience was illuminating and informed my understanding of how we teach about the past.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on biographies and biopics presented several challenges. Biographies and films tend to emphasize notable Americans whose experiences may not necessarily provide the best window through which to understand a given time and place in history. But my course materials strove to move beyond the most famous Americans (though we certainly could not avoid them entirely), and the approach largely worked. Studying the lives of normal people “offered a real-world perspective of Americans during the twentieth century,” as one student reflected. “Instead of just studying the events that

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<sup>3</sup>On the meeting of history and fiction, see Carnes, ed., *Novel History*.

happened, we were able to see how these events affected the society and people of the United States.” Another student commented, “I thought more about the individuals who would have witnessed the events I covered. Rather than thinking only about the sources I found, I thought about people who might have been impacted but history never recorded.”

I organized the course chronologically, though we moved throughout the twentieth century through biographies rather than major events. Often the biographies and major events coincided, but the purpose of this methodology was to see events through the eyes of individuals who either helped to shape them (such as the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights Movement era) or who were reacting to these larger events (such as the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, set in the Dust Bowl and California during the Great Depression). At the beginning of each class I provided brief overview lectures to provide context for a given time period, and then we moved into discussions of our films or books, the latter discussions led by student groups. Historical documents, such as letters from American Expeditionary Force nurse Helen Fairchild and International Red Cross ambulance driver Ernest Hemingway during the Great War or videos of speeches from Huey Long and Malcolm X, complemented the course materials, adding primary sources to offer background and depth to our conversations. Our materials mixed both real and imagined biographies, from films to memoirs to novels. We watched several documentaries, including *Freedom Riders*, which chronicles a tense but successful effort to end segregation on buses during the Civil Rights Movement, and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, which explores the excesses of capitalism and greed at the end of the twentieth century. Fictional films included *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Revolutionary Road*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Wall Street*, and my students’ consensus favorite, *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

What is so wonderful about *The Best Years of Our Lives* as a teaching tool is that it takes arguably the most dynamic and mythologized event of the twentieth century—the Second World War—and focuses not on battles or famous generals, but rather on the consequences of the conflict for three veterans as they return home and attempt to adjust to post-war life. Released in 1946 and directed by William Wyler, it is in many ways a quiet and contemplative film, a work of art that defies popular perception of the Second World War as a “good” war.<sup>4</sup> There are no action scenes, no moments of great valor or sacrifice, no ticker-tape parades or hyperbole of a “greatest” generation in this film, which won seven Academy Awards, including Best Motion Picture. Rather, the film offers a serious examination of the struggles of making sense of one’s life after participating in such a monumental event. Fred Derry, Homer Parrish, and Al Stephenson are strongly drawn and flawed characters, not stoic action heroes. The film does not romanticize war, instead showing how difficult it was for

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<sup>4</sup>See Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

Throughout my courses I always endeavor to help my students to understand that history is not something created only by the supposedly powerful, but that events are both experienced and shaped by people of various backgrounds. The goal was never more pressing than in this course and with this challenging assignment.

My largest fear was not a slew of final projects featuring an overly dramatic character like Indiana Jones, who, as admitted earlier, I had idolized as an impressionable and romantic youth. Instead, I worried about a seemingly more innocuous fictional character: Forrest Gump. Gump, a creation of author Winston Groom, appeared most famously in director Robert Zemeckis' 1994 film adaptation of Groom's 1986 novel, played in the film by Tom Hanks. The film won numerous Academy Awards, including the Oscars for Best Picture and Best Actor for Hanks. In the film, Forrest Gump has a charmed and oddly influential life, appearing at the intersection of nearly every important moment in the exciting and chaotic world of post-Vietnam America. Gump, amongst many other things, inspires a young Elvis Presley's gyrating dance moves; is in attendance at George Wallace's Stand in the Schoolhouse Door at the University of Alabama; serves and is wounded in Vietnam; meets both President Lyndon Johnson and President Richard Nixon; participates in the United States' goodwill ping pong competition with the Chinese, which helped pave the way for rapprochement; and invents the sport of jogging. Is Gump's story entertaining? Of course it is. But does it help us to understand the real experiences of Americans in a given time and place? Hardly.<sup>5</sup> The film portrays American history as a series of events—"one damn thing after another" as a character from the wonderful film *The History Boys* complains about a common misperception about history—with little introspection into these moments. Ultimately I wanted students to avoid creating characters like Forrest Gump, which would regrettably offer them only a facile way to learn about and reflect on the past.

Once the annotated bibliographies came in, I did have to help rein in the aspirations of my students, some of whom stretched the realm of believability in their proposals. The largest issue was scope, as many students hoped to cover an entire life in ten-to-fifteen pages. I urged them to focus instead on a specific moment in a character's life, which would allow them to add significant depth to their biography. I also saw the makings of several Gump-like characters. In one of my student's proposals, the author proffered that his main character would survive the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, consequently serve in the trenches of the First World War, survive the Spanish Flu pandemic, become a bootlegger during Prohibition, and finally lose everything following the stock market crash of 1929. That outline sounds like a great pitch for a Hollywood film, but ultimately it is too easy of a narrative and would most likely create a flat character with little depth. I wanted my students to think more

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<sup>5</sup>See Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, and Dan Porat, "What Can Forrest Gump Tell Us about Students' Historical Understanding?" *Social Education* 65 (January-February 2001), 55-58.

intimately about history, that the major events of our past are certainly important, but they are not necessarily the best windows through which to understand human experience. I urged my students to think about intimate stories that would not be riddled with clichés. Do we need, I asked one student, yet another story about the romanticized heroism of D-Day?

As they began researching and writing, some students struggled with the parameters of this assignment, particularly the task of thinking *creatively* about the past. Many had been raised on History Channel documentaries and rote memorization of names, dates, and facts. The students in our history program are very skilled at discussing *what* happened in the past, but often struggle with drawing larger significance from the past or discussing *why* events unfolded as they did. They would not succeed in this course without tapping deeply into their historical imaginations. Imagining a past (or the present or future, for that matter) is difficult, and while most of my students had some experience with creative writing, they did not realize how much work and research they would have to engage in to make their biographies as realistic as possible. Throughout the semester we talked about narrative and writing, touching on techniques such as foreshadowing and flashbacks, character development, irony, dialogue, and writing clichés. “Writing a paper like that is intimidating to me,” one student admitted, “so that is what I struggled with.” Others reflected on the challenges of thinking both creatively and historically: “I had to come up with an interesting way to talk about the subject I wanted to discuss. It took many iterations before I was happy with my biography.” Another student noted that “digging deep into the mindset of the time” provided a challenge while another found “trying to provide voice to the character” a major hurdle. “The biggest challenge I faced,” another wrote, “was putting all of the information together. It seemed like a daunting task, but once I started it all fell into place.”

Students chose a variety of methods for telling their imagined biographies. Some chose straightforward biographical narratives, while others experimented with more creative forms such as short stories and epistolary fiction, including letters and diary entries. Others included media such as photographs or poems, which added nice personal touches and realism to the biographies. Students set their imagined biographies throughout the entirety of the twentieth century, though biographies on soldiers and college students did dominate, and many situated their stories locally, which gave them opportunities to delve into local archives, adding an excellent sense of authenticity. Some characters included an aspiring grunge musician in Seattle in the early 1990s; a college student who experiences her political awakening by participating in the Free Speech Movement at the University of California in the 1960s; a soldier who is part of the disastrous Operation Restore Hope mission in Somalia in 1993; a man from Wisconsin ruminating on his relationship with his dying father through the memory of the famous Ice Bowl game between Green Bay and Dallas in 1967; and a 10-year-old girl from Chicago who is reflecting in her diary on events in Europe in the lead-up to the Second World War.

that some of my students engaged with, and does an excellent job of exploring the complicated gender dynamics of the 1970s:

They say the Great Lakes region was where some of the most dangerous ship voyages took place. The lakes have become responsible for many almost shipwrecks, and, unfortunately, the deaths of many hardworking men. Perhaps the most famous, and mysterious, of these shipwrecks that occurred was that of the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald*. The wreck of this ship took the lives of many loved family members, including my husband, Theodore. My name is Margaret Cowen, and I am here to tell you all about my husband and that terrifying day when he was claimed by the sea doing what he loved. . . .

Life at home became very hard for me and my children, John and Marie, while Theodore was gone. During the busy season, Theodore would be gone for days at a time, and when he did return home, it was often for only hours. This became hard because the children often missed him, and it began to create problems. As with all children, mine began to lash out at certain times without a strong male hand around to show them the ropes. I tried my best as a mother, and as the children grew older, the trouble making got better, and we were able to live a peaceful life while Theodore was away. This didn't mean that it became any easier to be a single mother during the times that Theodore was away. Due to the length of time some voyages took, Theodore was often not around to experience some of the children's most proud accomplishments. I remember telling Theodore of the day our John took his first steps, and how much he was hurting when he realized he would never be able to experience that moment. There were many times like this, however we knew that Theodore's job was very important so we could build a savings to help our children in their future endeavors.

As with most writing assignments, the quality varied, with some of the biographies offering little more than a list of events, though many, like the above examples, were exceptionally compelling, weaving together complex storylines based on solid research in both primary and secondary sources. Overall students did an excellent job of integrating primary sources, from various historical documents to letters, speeches, and photographs. Many studied primary sources such as diaries to get a better sense of language from that era. Students were required to provide a bibliography of their sources and also to include footnotes indicating where their research or, in some cases, direct quotes originated. It was clear that most students greatly enjoyed the process of research and writing, as they loved digging into documents and working through the puzzle of how to construct an imagined biography

based on authentic sources. One commented that the imagined biography was an effective way of learning “because of the amount of detail I was allowed to put into the paper. I didn’t just regurgitate facts, but created a whole world based in fact and had my character live in it.” Another reflected, “All of the details I learned by doing the [imagined biography] I wouldn’t have learned. It is honestly the most I’ve learned in any class.”

Other students appreciated the freedom and creativity they were granted with this assignment compared to typical assessments including quizzes, exams, or a research paper. “I felt,” a student noted, “like since it was such a large part of our grade, we had more control of the grade and could work on our terms. It was actually fun creating something similar to what we had been discussing and studying throughout the semester.” Another commented, “It gave me the opportunity to write creatively within a certain time period, drawing together a wide array of resources from the real world to create a fictional one.” Another loved “writing on a subject as if you were really there.” One student reflected, “It helped me understand a lot about the time period in a fun creative way.” Finally, a student noted that the best part of the imagined biography project was “learning more about the time period that we researched and [that] we could use our creativity.”

Ultimately students found both studying and writing biography as effective ways to better understand and interact with the past. Eighty-five percent of students preferred the imagined biography to exams or a standard research paper, and one hundred percent of students felt that biography, both real and imagined, was a useful way to learn about the past. One noted, “It forced us to focus in immense detail on a certain period and gave us free rein to place our created character in the time period. It allowed us, instead of retelling someone’s life, to research in more detail about the period. Honestly, I feel it was the best writing assignment I was ever given and the most detail I have ever put in a paper.”

This assignment forced students to think about the past in ways they never had before. Historical imagination is a critical component of history education, and by combining history and fiction, my students used their historical imagination, challenging themselves to dig deeper into understanding how historical actors reacted to various situations. Several students noted that the imagined biography helped them to think differently about the past. “It allowed us to think about history in a different way,” one student wrote. “Instead of writing about events, we used events as a backdrop to tell a story about an individual.” Another wrote, “I had to think differently than I ever have before. I have written so much over the course of my college career, but this is the first time I have written fiction in all of my years in college.” One student thought the assignment greatly promoted and enhanced critical thinking, noting, “Writing a biography in this course allows someone to gain further insight into a particular cultural movement or national event while simultaneously developing critical thinking skills.” Another student commented, “It gave me a new perspective of history; a different way of thinking.” The larger goal of the course was not lost on students, as

Is there further research that you will need to engage in? Your bibliographic essay should be 3–5 pages in length, double-spaced, use proper grammar, and exhibit a sophisticated sense of analysis and critical thinking. This paper is worth ten percent (50 points) of your total grade for this course, and is due on Monday, October 7, via the Dropbox on D2L.

**Peer Review:** For the peer review assignment, you will provide written feedback (1–2 pages) to a classmate on a draft of their final paper. Please give constructive criticism, meaning comments that can be used to improve the paper. You may want to comment on the paper's overall narrative and effectiveness, its use of sources, overall structure, and style. Also note a preliminary grade that you would assign to the paper. Please give your paper draft to your partner no later than Monday, November 18 and e-mail your commentary to your partner and also submit them via the Dropbox on D2L. The peer review is worth ten percent (50 points) of your total grade for this course, and is due Monday, November 25.

**Final Paper:** Your final paper will consist of an imagined biography of your created individual. You may choose to write about one specific incident in this person's life, or you may take a more comprehensive approach, chronicling a larger period. Remember that the purpose of this assignment is to create a realistic portrayal of an American during a specific time and place in the twentieth century. How you choose to do so is up to you—the format could, for example, be a short story or a more conventional historical biography. Since the biography is based on historical research, you must integrate the sources you have collected throughout the semester, citing at least three primary and three secondary sources. Please cite your materials when providing information that is not common knowledge, quotations, or analysis that is not your own. Your paper should be 10–15 pages in length, double-spaced, use proper grammar, and exhibit a sophisticated sense of analysis, critical thinking, and creativity. This paper is worth forty percent (200 points) of your total grade for this course.