

earlier paintings, such as Thomas Cole's *Storm near Mount Washington* (circa 1825–1830), had shown it that way.

The Art-Union show's two other breathtaking paintings—*American Harvesting* by Jasper F. Cropsey (1823–1900) and *New England Scenery* by Frederic E. Church (1826–1900)—were composite images, but were very much like Kensett's in scale, composition, and theme. The three scenes, Troyen says, had a "Jeffersonian harmony and idyllic quality," and offered "the sense of America as the new Eden." It was a reassuring vision then, for outside the Art-Union's walls, Troyen writes, "the nation was in turmoil, scarcely recovered from the crises precipitating . . . the Compromise of 1850."

The artistic uplift was no accident. The Art-Union, managed by a committee composed of

21 prominent New Yorkers, envisioned itself (in the words of an annual report) as "one of those great institutions which influence the character and manners of the whole nation." Engravings of Kensett's and Cropsey's works were sent to the Art-Union's 13,578 members, and each member also could hope to win an original painting in the lottery the organization held each year.

But the lottery proved the Art-Union's undoing. The New York Supreme Court declared it illegal and ordered the Art-Union to sell all its holdings and cease operations. Church, Kensett, Cropsey, and many other artists painted inspiring landscapes through the 1850s, Troyen notes, until the Civil War "made such detailed representations of Eden in America impossible to believe."

## Biography's Perils

"To Edit a Life" by Peter Davison, in *The Atlantic* (Oct. 1992), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

As biography has grown increasingly popular and lucrative in recent decades, more and more writers have tried to put the lives of the great, or at least the well-known, between hard covers. Often the results come under the heading of what Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography"—works that emphasize the subject's shortcomings and sins. Robert Caro's multivolume treatment of Lyndon Johnson, according to some critics, falls into that category. So, needless to say, do a host of less seriously intended works, such as Kitty Kelley's venomous blockbusters on Nancy Reagan et al.

People in the public eye now have little protection under libel law, thanks to *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) and other Supreme Court rulings—and the proliferation of sensational biographies owes something to this change. Yet while the door has thus been opened wide for unadmiring Boswells, Davison, an editor at Houghton Mifflin, says that *serious* biographers still face a host of imposing obstacles.

A serious biography, Davison notes, demands "the author's time, attention, scholarship, and fidelity to the truth or what can be discovered of the truth." If the subject is not long dead, the biographer must obtain evidence from "the still living, who tend to have a particular interest in seeing that the life of the beloved (or detested) is written 'accurately.'" The author who takes a different view of the subject may find himself out in the cold.

Further hurdles appear when the subject is a

literary artist. If he or she is not long dead, the biographer must obtain permission to quote from the published works. Since 1963, when poet Sylvia Plath committed suicide at age 30, at least nine would-be biographers, according to Davison, have had either to submit their books for scrutiny by the Plath estate "or to refrain from quoting the very poetry that made Plath famous." Four of the proposed biographies never made it into print.

Literary biographers now face yet another hurdle, thanks to a federal court's ruling in *Random House v. Salinger* (1987). The court prevented Ian Hamilton, after he had finished his book about the reclusive novelist J. D. Salinger, from even paraphrasing, let alone quoting, Salinger's *unpublished* letters without the author's permission—which he did not grant.

Writing the book sometimes seems the least of a biographer's trials. Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) is, in Davison's judgment, "the most penetrating and eloquent life" of the poet yet to appear. It fell to him to modify Stevenson's text so that both estate and author were relatively satisfied. But Stevenson's book came out after Plath "had been elevated posthumously into an illusory martyrdom of the feminist movement." Despite Stevenson's fidelity to the known facts and because of the Plath estate's obvious influence on her book, *Bitter Fame* "was attacked, misinterpreted, and harangued . . . by ideologues or self-interested critics" in England and "relatively ignored" by the U.S. public.

## **Historical Fiction and The Facts**

The historical novel is supposed to be faithful to the known facts of the period in which it is set. But can it be too faithful? Indeed, is too much historical knowledge a disadvantage to the novelist? Thomas Mallon, author of *Aurora 7*, and William Styron, author of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, offer reflections.

*Though Aurora 7 is set against the background of a very public event—the nearly disastrous space flight of astronaut Scott Carpenter—it was usually what I found in the back pages of newspapers and in advertisements that gave me ideas. I had forgotten, for instance, that the New York Times used to publish “Incoming Passenger and Mail Ships,” and when I noticed that the Leonardo da Vinci docked at 9 A.M. at West 44th Street on the day my novel was to be set, I stumbled toward the scene it would take to put one of my minor characters in motion.*

*John Updike has written . . . that in fiction “reality is—chemically, atomically, biologically—a fabric of microscopic accuracies.” Only through these tiny, literal accuracies can the historical novelist achieve . . . an overall feeling of authenticity . . .*

*Is there, though, a point at which the letter begins to kill the spirit? Mary McCarthy once spoke of how, while writing her novel *Birds of America*, she was told by someone that the Sistine Chapel, in which she'd set a chapter taking place around New Year's Day in 1965, might have been closed at that time for a Vatican Council. She was aghast. After making inquiries, she was relieved to learn that the chapel had indeed been open when she had her characters in it . . .*

*Every historical novelist will decide these things differently, will calibrate his fidelity to the real past along a different scale. In writing *Aurora 7*, I realized early on that I had to move my main character's entire childhood from Nassau County, where I'd grown up, to Westchester, a place I hardly knew, because Grand Central Terminal was crucial to the plot I had in mind. The commuter trains from Nassau County ran then, as they do now, into Penn Station, not Grand Central. So that was that: I could hardly tamper with the underground infrastructure of the city. I did, however, take certain liberties that I'm sure Mary McCarthy would not have. I have President Kennedy making his remark that 'life is unfair' a year earlier than he actually made it. But it was useful to have him say it [then], so I went ahead.*

—Thomas Mallon  
*The American Scholar* (Autumn 1992)

*Although it didn't dawn on me at the time, I later realized that one of the benefits for me in Nat Turner's story was not an abundance of historical material but, if anything, a scantiness. This was a drama that took place in a faraway backwater when information gathering was primitive. While it may be satisfying and advantageous for historians to feast on rich archival material, the writer of historical fiction is better off when past events have left him with short rations. A good example might be the abolitionist John Brown, who made his prodigious mark on history only 30 years after Nat Turner but whose every word and move were recorded by enterprising journalists, producing documents enough to fill a boxcar.*

*The novelist attempting John Brown's story is in conflict with the myriad known details of the chronicle, and his imagination cannot simply run off in a certain direction—which is what fiction writers need their imaginations to do—because he is fettered by already established circumstances. He is in danger of being overwhelmed by an avalanche of data . . .*

*The single meaningful document having to do with the Turner revolt was a short . . . transcript that gave the title to my own work . . . Aside from Nat's own *Confessions* and a number of contemporary newspaper articles . . . there was virtually no material of that period that was useful in shedding further light on Nat Turner as a person or on the uprising. Such a near-vacuum [seemed to place] me in the ideal position of knowing neither too much nor too little. A bad historical novel often leaves the impression of a hopelessly overfurnished house, cluttered with facts the author wishes to show off as fruits of his diligent research. Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist critic whose monumental *The Historical Novel* should be read by all who attempt the genre, views the disregard of facts as a state of grace; the creator of historical fiction, he argues convincingly, should have a thorough—perhaps even magisterial—command of the period with which he is dealing, but he should not permit his work to be governed by particular historical facts.*

—William Styron  
*American Heritage* (October 1992)