

The Good Biographer

“Waking the Dead: The Biography Boom in America” by Ron Chernow, in *culturefront* (Summer 2000), New York Council for the Humanities, 150 Broadway, Ste. 1700, New York, N.Y. 10038.

Biographies tumble off the presses in profusion these days, a boom linked, for better or worse, to “the current obsession with celebrity,” observes Chernow, the author of *Titan* (1998), an acclaimed biography of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Critics such as Janet Malcolm and Stanley Fish complain that biographers often impose a specious meaning on the messy reality of a life. But Chernow contends that while lesser authors simply glorify or, more often, vilify their subjects, good biographers are far more respectful of complexity.

“The best biographers don’t see one monolithic truth about a person, but many overlapping truths,” he writes. “Psychologists and novelists . . . have given us a protean sense of the human personality as a collection of personas, implausibly mixed together.” Often, as authors find out more during their research, their attitude toward their subject radically changes—which wouldn’t happen, Chernow points out, “if biographers were all prisoners of personal or political

agendas.” Aware of “the subjective nature of their work,” many biographers, says Chernow, aim not for “some impossibly ‘definitive’ portrait, but simply [for] honest approximations of the truth. They don’t necessarily squeeze, bend, hack, and torture their subjects’ lives to fit the Procrustean bed of their preconceived theories.”

But how does the good biographer convey the subject’s life in all its “roundedness”? “Frequently, the most effective means . . . is to offer multiple perspectives and ample detail,” Chernow says. By capturing the subject in various settings and “drawing on numerous anecdotes and vignettes,” the biographer can “conjure up the person without resorting to heavy-handed authorial intervention.”

“One of the wonders of the craft,” Chernow reflects, “is that a wealth of testimony from diverse and seemingly contradictory sources can sometimes cohere into a sharp, realistic portrait. All the little dots of color suddenly resolve themselves into a brilliant likeness.”

EXCERPT

Against the E-book

When that day [of the electronic book] comes, what will we mean by knowledge? What is a culture if the information that forms it never stands still? Since the development of the codex in roughly 400 A.D., we have come to live with an implicit hierarchy of information, with books at the top. They are our final record. First we talk about an idea, then we assay it in newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, and finally we decide whether it merits permanent remembrance. If so, it finds its way into a book.

The primacy of the book follows naturally from its form. It has a protective shell that keeps dust and sunlight off the fragile printed pages, allowing the words within to be legible for centuries. This primacy will disappear when the book becomes as evanescent as an image on a TV screen. Without its physical advantages, how long will the book’s authority persist, and what, in turn—if anything—will take its place? Probably nothing, because nothing will ever again have the physical properties to do so. This absence will in turn change our mental lives. The codex was proof (some would say misleading evidence) that there were ideas that lasted, that deserved special respect. The invention of the e-book will push us to the reverse conclusion—that knowledge is in perpetual flux. It will make relativists of us all.

—D. T. Max, a contributing editor of *The Paris Review*,
in *The American Scholar* (Summer 2000)