

# Writing a Life

## *What Should Literary Biography Do?*

Robert K. Landers

Last fall, Robert Frost appeared to undergo a savage attack at the hands of acclaimed novelist Joyce Carol Oates. In a fascinating short story, “Lovely, Dark, Deep,” published in the November issue of *Harper’s*, Oates evoked an imaginary encounter between the seventy-seven-year-old Frost and one Evangeline Fife, a young blond interviewer from a journal called *Poetry Parnassus*. The interview takes place at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in Vermont in 1951, and leads to the elderly poet being felled by his demonic inquisitor.

Initially coming upon Frost “slack-jawed and dozing on a porch swing,” Fife whips out her camera and surreptitiously takes seven “humiliating” snapshots of him, later to be sold to a private collector. She then wakes the great man up. Pretty and dressed “like an earnest schoolgirl,” Fife has prepared assiduously for the interview. Where a savvy interviewer would defer any questions that might put the interview itself at risk until she had gotten answers to her less provocative ones, Fife makes an early aggressive thrust connecting Frost’s poems to his life. Was the death in 1899 of his and his wife’s first son at age three—the subject of his poem “Home Burial”—“a death that might have been prevented except for the mother’s Christian Scientist beliefs?”\* Frost stares back “with something like hatred.”

The moment passes, and after some unseemly salacious sallies by the old man, Fife turns to her “list of questions aimed to draw from the poet quotable remarks.” She receives well-worn answers, and as the interview proceeds, her questioning becomes more pointed. She tells Frost that his poems “are filled with images of darkness and destruction.” She passionately objects to the failure of his patriotic 1942 poem “The Gift Outright” to take Native Americans into account. She suggests that instead of the “homespun New England bard” his audiences imagine, he may in fact be “[an] emissary from dark places,” proudly defending “the very worst in us.”

At this point, we read, “a fierce light shone in the poet’s faded-blue eyes,” and Evangeline Fife is “suffused with a sort of ferocity, too.” Speaking in a “throaty, thrilled voice

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Robert Frost at 85

that hardly seemed the voice of a young virginal woman,” she indicts his indifference to his children, a failing reflected in his “sly, coded poems.” Remorselessly, she hurls graphic examples of Frost’s mistreatment of his children, accusing him of being unable to love them, of loving only himself. As the story nears its end, the enraged Frost hits back at his tormentor: “All you can do, people like you, contemptible little people, spiritual dwarves, is to scavenge in the detritus of the poet’s life without grasping the fact that the poet’s *life* is of no consequence to the poet.... You fail to realize that only the *poetry* counts—the poetry that will prevail long after the poet has passed on and you and your ilk are gone and forgotten.” Frost then rises to his feet, stumbles down the porch steps, and falls heavily to the ground, as his inquisitor vanishes. Lying helpless in the grass, the old man draws his notebook to his chest, a shield to protect “his loud-thumping heart...from harm, from the assault of his enemies.”

“Lovely, Dark, Deep” provoked a widespread reaction. Many readers agreed with the *Washington Post*’s Ron Charles, who judged Oates’s story “a wicked takedown” of Robert Frost. Several Frost biographers objected to the story’s portrayal of him, as Alice Robb reported in the *New Republic*; one, William H. Pritchard (a frequent contributor to *Commonweal*), called the story “utterly preposterous and quite distasteful.” But I surmised that Oates—who long ago coined the term “pathography” to characterize literary biographies that dwell excessively on the “sensational underside” of their subject’s life—wrote the story to condemn interviewers, and by extension biographers, who do just that. And indeed, Oates has come to her own defense, telling Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times* that her story is “really about the sensation-mongering, ‘malicious’ personal and biographical accusations that are made against a poet,” despite the fact that “poetry and the life should have nothing to do with each other.”

Seen in this light, the story does not indulge a bogus approach to literary biography, but rather satirizes it. Poets and novelists like Oates want their works to be judged solely on their literary merits, not subjected to reductionist simplification by biographers bent on finding the “real-life” sources of their art. Yet the same poets and novelists also claim credit as the “authors” of their works. How, then, can they deny that biographical explorations might yield insights into their art?

Literary biographies at their best can indeed provide such insights—but, of course, in doing so, they can also cast doubt on the artists’ transmutation of the particulars of their own lives into the universals of their art. Although readers of biographies are the beneficiaries of these illuminating inquiries, poets and novelists remain understandably wary—and fearful that their own imperfect lives may in the end overwhelm their works. That fear is well-grounded, as a question posed by Irish novelist Edna O’Brien in her brief biography *James Joyce* (1999) suggests. “Do writers have to be such monsters in order to create?” O’Brien asks at one point. “I believe that they do. It is a paradox that while wrestling with language to capture the human condition they become more callous, and cut off from the very human traits which they so glisteningly depict.”

Oates’s notion of “pathography” first surfaced in her 1988 *New York Times* review of a biography of the novelist and short-story writer Jean Stafford (1915–79). As Oates defined it, the typical pathography of a distinguished writer deals in “dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct.” Such biographers, she continued, “so relentlessly catalogue their [subject’s] most private, vulnerable, and least illuminating moments, as to divest them of all mystery save the crucial and unexplained: How did a distinguished body of work emerge from so undistinguished a life?” Stafford’s biographer seemed “well-intentioned,” Oates conceded—un-

like biographer Lawrence Thompson, in whose notorious *Robert Frost*, she charged, “a true malevolence seems to be the guiding motive.” And how should a fair-minded biographer deal with a literary subject’s “sensational underside”? The answer, Oates implied, lies in proportionality. In Stafford’s case, instead of giving “her twenty-odd years of alcoholic crises as much weight as the earlier, productive years,” her biographer should simply have “summarize[d the] years of fitful dissolution in a brief space,” leaving the spotlight trained on the “more scattered, and less dramatic, periods of accomplishment and well being.”

I was aware of Oates’s coinage of “pathography” (though I hadn’t yet read the review in which it originated) when I was working on *An Honest Writer* (2004), my biography of novelist James T. Farrell. The concept hardly seemed relevant to me at first, since I admired Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* and his five O’Neill-O’Flaherty novels, as well as his courageous stand against Stalinism in the 1930s. I knew, of course, that Farrell had later fallen out of favor in the literary world. And I knew he’d had several failed marriages. But I hoped that a close look at his life and his best works would help restore him to his rightful place in the literary firmament.

As my years of research progressed, however, I came to see a less attractive side of Farrell. He was self-centered, even quite childish at times, and had problems with alcohol and drugs. During the late 1950s and early ’60s, after leaving his longtime publishing house Vanguard, he railed defiantly against editors and publishers. The furies assailing him, I came to realize, reflected not merely the vagaries of literary fashion but also his own limitations as an artist. After *The Face of Time*, the excellent and unexpected fifth volume in the O’Neill-O’Flaherty series, was published in 1953, Farrell suffered a decade of literary, financial, and personal difficulties. Unable to provide Vanguard with any of the three additional novels he’d promised, he abandoned the firm in 1958, dreaming of a marvelous artistic rebirth. Swiftly signing a contract with Doubleday for four novels, he then found it hard to produce the first. It finally appeared in 1963, but *The Silence of History*, a portrait of the artist as a young man that was not very different from what Farrell had written before, gave clear evidence that his grandiose hopes for an artistic rebirth were to go unfulfilled.

Because the last quarter-century of Farrell’s life was less important in terms of his literary achievement and less interesting in terms of his politics—and because I had less raw material—I covered it in three chapters, totaling seventy pages. The 1930s, ’40s, and early ’50s, in contrast, were covered in ten chapters, totaling more than 260 pages. To judge from Oates’s criticism of pathography, I probably should have reduced my coverage of his decline even more. But I was interested, and assumed my readers would be too, in Farrell the human being, not merely Farrell the author. From the beginning, I wanted to see him as he was, and show him as he was, in the context of his time—the literary Farrell, the political Farrell, and the human Farrell.

Cleo Paturis, whom Farrell was fortunate to have as his

companion during the last decade and a half of his life (he died in 1979), was very supportive and helpful to me as I researched and wrote my biography. Besides allowing me to quote from his works, she gave me her time and her memories, and never tried to dictate what I should write. She was not small-minded. She once recalled that Farrell called her “the least petty person that he had ever known in his whole life”—and with good reason, I would add, based on my experience with her over more than a decade.

Cleo loved Farrell and admired all his works, but was certainly aware of his failings. After I’d learned from another source of his abuse of amphetamines and Valium, for example, she acknowledged the fact, and told me how she’d refused “to throw my cards in with him till he got off” the drugs. Eventually she told me about the lawsuit she’d filed against a physician who, unbeknownst to her, had prescribed amphetamines for Farrell for nearly three years before his death, quite possibly contributing to his fatal heart attack.

So, although I knew that Cleo wanted Farrell to be seen in the best possible light, I was hopeful that, when I gave her the manuscript of my biography in 2003, she would regard it as a fair-minded attempt by an admiring but not uncritical writer to see Farrell as he really was. Soon, however, I received a letter and was shocked and disappointed to read her verdict: my manuscript was “so anti-Farrell,” Cleo wrote, she could only conclude that I “must hate” him. “Why on earth did you elect to write a bio on this man?” she asked me. “You don’t like him, you don’t like his work. I don’t get it.” She acknowledged that there had been an “awful period in his life,” during the 1950s and early ’60s, but noted that he’d lived some fifteen years after that. “And yet you seem focused on the lean and mean years.”

No argument I could offer to the contrary—including citations of readers who found my portrayal of Farrell a sympathetic one—could change her mind. The high praise I lavished on *Studs Lonigan* and the O’Neill-O’Flaherty novels in *An Honest Writer* did not count; nor did my laudatory words about Farrell’s “steadfast fidelity to his own high aspirations, his cherished integrity, his lonely struggle against the Stalinists, and his efforts for freedom at home and abroad.” In retrospect, I think what may have wounded her most, along with my account of those “lean and mean years,” was my dismissal of Farrell’s Doubleday novels, most of them published during his years with Cleo. “None of the novels,” I wrote, “would escape the confines of the minor.” That did not mean, of course, that the novels did not have their individual merits—and, not wanting to lengthen unnecessarily an already too-long manuscript, perhaps I did not do them full justice. Even so, to my mind, that hardly spelled “pathography.”

I next saw Cleo (for the last time, as it turned out; she died in 2010) the following February, at the New York Public Library, at an event she had organized to celebrate Farrell on the centenary of his birth. I and my book went unmentioned by the speakers, and, despite my publisher’s best efforts, no sign of the first full-scale biography of Farrell was anywhere

to be seen. Cleo was frosty to me at first, but she warmed up again—to me, anyway, if not to the biography. She said she didn’t want to put any obstacles in my book’s way—and, of course, she could have, by seeking to withdraw her written permission to me to quote from Farrell’s writings, or by speaking out publicly against the book. But she did not. As Farrell said, she was not a petty person.

A quarter-century after the publication of the work that had occasioned Oates’s reflections on pathography, I finally read it. David Roberts’s *Jean Stafford* is a terrific biography. But don’t take my word for it. Attend to what a friend of Stafford’s, novelist Louis Auchincloss, had to say: “I should not have believed that any biographer could do what David Roberts has done: to weave together, into a pattern that makes sense, the tragic compulsions that disintegrated Jean Stafford’s life with the development of her literary genius.” Novelist Walker Percy praised the biographer for showing that “the tragedy [of Stafford’s life] is somehow of a piece with her fiction.” This unity between life and work—even a tragic unity—was important, Percy went on. “Perhaps her life could have been otherwise, different, less star-crossed—who knows?—but we would not want her fiction to be otherwise, different, less star-crossed.”

Were these distinguished writers unable to recognize (and condemn) pathography when they saw it? Or did they just have a more complex view than Oates of the relationship between a writer’s distinguished fiction and “undistinguished” life? Surely the latter, in my view. Furthermore, if we accept Oates’s prescription for how literary biographies should be written—that is, with scant attention paid to the “sensational underside” of the subject’s life—shouldn’t we extend it to biographies of eminent people in other walks of life? Shouldn’t biographies of, say, leading political figures focus on what they accomplished (and failed to) in the political realm, not on the “sensational undersides” of their lives? Shouldn’t a biography of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy, for instance, focus on his life as a legislator and politician, not on his disgraceful behavior in the fatal accident at Chappaquiddick and elsewhere in his personal life?

And if so, why stop with biographies? Shouldn’t a novelist who writes a thinly disguised fiction about actual people be held to the same high standard? For instance, shouldn’t a novel inspired by that 1969 Chappaquiddick accident, told from the point of view of the female victim—a novel that gives only a scant paragraph to the unnamed senator’s “stubborn and zealous dedication to social reform”—be considered a novelistic exercise in pathography? Well, that novel exists—*Black Water*, published in 1992, by none other than Joyce Carol Oates.

In “Lovely, Dark, Deep,” Oates did not even thinly disguise Frost, let alone create an entirely imaginary poet, with his own name and own set of hidden sins, to make her point about poetry and the poet’s life. Perhaps the story was a wicked takedown after all. ■