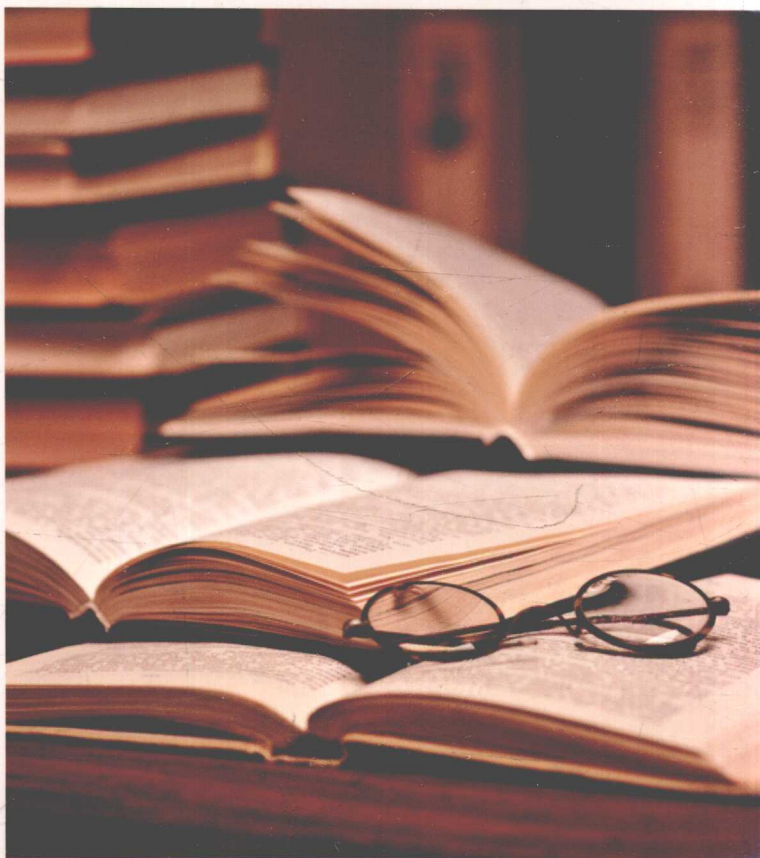


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Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies

上海交通大学传记中心主办

Center for Life Writing, SJTU

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卷首语

传记(life writing)是人类的纪念碑。文化的起源中就包含着传记的因素,孔子的《论语》、柏拉图的苏格拉底回忆录和“四福音书”为传记树立了不朽的经典。其他文学和文化的文本形式,大都随着时代的变迁而消亡,成为历史的陈迹,只有传记以顽强的生命力绵延不绝;到了21世纪更是超过曾经盛极一时的小说,成为文化文本中的最大类别。传统的他传、自传、回忆录、书信、日记、游记等继续繁荣,新兴的口述历史、群体传记又异军突起。传记还超越了文字的媒介,同电影、电视以及互联网和自媒体结缘,开拓出广阔的新空间,拥有难以计量的读者。越来越多的人为自己、为亲爱者写作传记,以保留一份纪念。21世纪是属于传记的时代。

传记的发展,提出了许许多多的问题,需要研究和讨论;本刊是中国境内第一个专门研究传记的刊物,创办本刊的目的就是提供一个发表和交流的园地,为中国传记的发展聊尽绵薄之力。

在一个全球化的时代,《现代传记研究》是一个开放性的刊物。它向中外传记界开放,它发表对各种传记类型的问题,包括历史的、现实的和理论的问题,所进行的不同角度的研究和探讨;它鼓励和欢迎专家、作者和读者之间的交流和互动;它提倡视角和方法与时俱进、不断创新,同时也倡导严谨、求实的文风。它的目的只有一个,促进传记学术的繁荣,推动传记的发展。

办好一份刊物是一件艰苦的事,我们会不断学习、不断反思、不断改善以求进步。我们也吁求国内外传记界的朋友们、传记爱好者的支持,你们的关注和参与,你们的能力和智慧,是办好这份刊物最有力的保证,期待着你们!

《现代传记研究》编辑部

Editor's Note

As a monument to honor human beings, life writing has permeated culture since its origin. *Analects of Confucius* by Confucius, Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, and *The Four Gospels* are immortal classics in the history of life writing. Despite the fact that many genres of literature and culture perish over time, life writing has persisted in a tenacious manner, and the twenty-first century is witnessing a golden age of life writing, which even surpasses the novel, the once-dominating genre. Life writing now is among the most esteemed of cultural texts. Such traditional forms as biography, autobiography, memoirs, letters, diary and travel writing still maintain prominence and the emerging oral history and collective lives demonstrate great momentum. Simultaneously, life writing, having crossed the border of textual medium into the domain of movies, TV, Internet and We Media, claims an ever new and extensive space with the potential for innumerable readers. An increasing number of people have taken to life writing for themselves or for their loved ones, aspiring to erect an everlasting monument. In brief, the twenty-first century is an era of life writing.

Life writing as a genre of discourse has posed a great number of questions, requiring energies devoted to deeper studies and thorough scholarly discussions. The *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* takes the initiative in China as the first journal exclusively devoted to life writing studies. It aims to make a distinctive contribution to the development of Chinese life writing by providing a forum for publication and exchange of views in scholarship.

In the context of globalization, the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* is an open journal, accessible to the life writing community home and abroad, publishing research and explorations on all kinds of life writing issues (historical, practical and theoretical) from various perspectives, encouraging and welcoming communication and interaction among scholars, authors and readers, and highlighting innovative perspectives and methodologies as well as rigorous and realistic style. Our over-arching commitment is to facilitate the development of life writing and to bring it to a new level of excellence.

A full-fledged journal requires arduous and painstaking efforts. We pledge to consistently aim for progress through consistent learning, reflection, and improvement. We also appeal to dear friends in the life writing community at home and abroad and devotees of life writing for your support, attention and participation. Your talents and wisdom are the most powerful assurance of our success. We are looking forward to your help!

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Biographers Write not only the Life, but also the Time

Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

In China, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin are renowned not just for their winning the Pulitzer prize, but also for their writing the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Their *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* is so thought-provoking that its Chinese version is well received and reviewed among Chinese readers. Scholars in China examine their biography from the perspectives of politics, theme study, and writing techniques. In February, 2016, our editor email-interviewed the two distinguished biographers, who shared their own writing experiences and insights with us. In the following interview, Q represents the questions asked by our editor whereas KB is short for Kai Bird and MJS for Martin J. Sherwin.

Q: *Mr. Kai Bird, you've published quite highly acclaimed political biographies. As a journalist, do you think there is a short cut from writing news stories to writing lives? Would you please brief your own experience working on life writing? What are your lessons from it?*

KB: There are no “short-cuts” in the writing of biography. But yes, I started out as a journalist, and I think that experience taught me something about learning to write clearly. The cliché is that journalists “write the first draft of history.” But this has an element of truth. So for instance, I often rely on and cite news stories from the *New York Times* or other journalistic outlets in my biographies. I use this material as background and color—and it is often invaluable for recreating the context and details of a life story. My first biography was about John J. McCloy, a powerful Wall Street lawyer close to the Rockefeller family. McCloy served many presidents from Franklin Roosevelt through Ronald Reagan. And though he hated to get his name in the newspaper, there were in fact many “stories” about him in the press.

My biography of McCloy took me ten years to research and write. My next project was *The Color of Truth*, a biography of McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's National Security Adviser, and a key architect of the Vietnam War. This book took me seven years to write. Next was a

collaboration with Martin Sherwin on his biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Marty had worked on this project for twenty years before I joined him for the next five years. We finished *American Prometheus* right on time in 2005! My next book was a memoir of a childhood in the Middle East: *Crossing Mandelbaum Gate*. That took me only four years to write. And my last book, *The Good Spy*, a biography of a CIA officer took me only three years to write. So I am getting faster!

Q: *Interesting. You've published political biographies. Biographers often feel it a hard nut to crack dealing with the writer's works when they work on literary biographies. What do you think are the tough things in writing political biographies? Now you write faster. Michael Holroyd once told me Doris Lessing wrote much faster than he. In your experience is it because you become experienced that you spent less years on a biography, or because the subjects' materials vary as in the case of a president's life by contrast to a spy's life?*

MJS: I'm answering this for Kai. There is no doubt that the first biography is the most difficult to write. An inexperienced biographer often believes that he has to learn everything (which of course is impossible) before writing. In addition, one learns from experience how to expedite the research process. I think the speed at which one writes is more related to how well you know the material rather than some internal skill that you develop, although I would not deny that writing experience is a good coach.

Q: *Prof. Martin J. Sherwin, you devoted 20 years on the Oppenheimer project. What hinders you from completing it in a shorter time?*

MJS: The short answer is "other commitments." I signed the contract to write a biography of Oppenheimer with Knopf in 1979. For the next four years I tracked down people who knew and/or had worked with Oppenheimer and tape-recorded in-depth, interviews with them. I also did enormous amounts of research in various archives in the USA and Europe. But in 1984 I had the opportunity to organize and international relations center (the Nuclear Age History and Humanities Center) at Tufts University and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Shortly thereafter I began a program (the Global Classroom) that connected through broadcast television my classes at Tufts University on the nuclear arms race with a parallel class taught at Moscow State University by academician Evgeny Velikhov (Gorbachev's science advisor). I had to raise \$60,000 per program to make this happen, and that took up all the time I had beyond my teaching commitments. Oppenheimer stayed in the drawer until 1992 when the programs ended. But I then took a new position in 1993 as the director of an international relations center at Dartmouth College. I had significant administrative responsibilities which, again, left little time for

Oppenheimer. In 1996 I returned to Tufts and went back to work on Oppenheimer. I have to admit that I no longer found it as exciting as things I had been doing. In 1998 Kai (who was/is a good friend with whom I had written many articles) was looking for his next project and I invited him to join me in completing Oppenheimer. It was a great collaboration.

Q: *Would you please give us an overview of the development in political biographies in the USA? What are the success and problems? Could you recommend one or two biographies published in recent years? What is the worth do you think?*

KB: I once had an editor who told me that only two kinds of biographies sell in America, first, biographies about the American Civil War, and secondly, biographies of famous American presidents like John Kennedy or Franklin Roosevelt. So that is one reason why my current project is a biography of Jimmy Carter! As to recommendations of new books, I recently read Scott Shane's astonishing *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President and the Rise of the Drone*. It is a dual biography of President Obama and Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born imam who was killed in Yemen by an American drone strike. I would also recommend Dan Ephron's gripping book, *Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel*.

Q: *What do you think of theories in terms of life writing? What theories have you used in your own practice?*

KB: In my opinion, there is only one presumed rule when writing biography and that is the rule of chronology. The biographer has to tell the story from birth to death, and with rare exceptions that means telling the story in chronological order.

Q: *What issues do you think scholars of biography studies and biography practitioners should explore?*

KB: Biographers should understand that they are writing not just the life but also the times. In this sense, biography is the best history because it is the most accessible to readers. Biography is fun, but because it is focused on the one life, it can also claim reasonably to be the most accurate and factual. This is not to say that biography is objective. No historian can be or should be "objective." Objectivity is only in the eye of the beholder—and the pretense of objectivity can result in the most boring of narratives. So biographers need to be open about their perspectives, their biases, their point of view—and buttress their opinions with as much evidence as possible. But the whole point is to tell an important story, one that explains something about the historical time period.

Q: *Your idea must be well-received among biographers. Often a biographer is supposed to assume his stand after he makes a thorough study of his subject.*

The holocaust denier David Irving has insisted that he sticks to his idea because there is a scarcity of evidence which supports the statement otherwise. What do you think of the relationship between evidence, facts and statements such as in Irving's case?

MJS: Irving says there is a scarcity of facts about the existence of the holocaust which is clearly false. There is more evidence (films, living testimony, Nazi documents etc.) about the details of the holocaust than about any other major historical event. Irving's position is not very different from insisting that the earth is flat. I am a historian first and a biographer second. Facts rule; argument has to follow evidence. I am primarily interested in biographies that illuminate important historical issues. I chose Oppenheimer because it was clear that by illuminating his life experiences I (we- Kai and I) could dig deeper into an understanding of the political experiences of a progressive person during the 1930s; understand the personal experiences of the leader of the atomic bomb project and thus understand more deeply the role of scientific leadership; and, finally, we could expose exactly what the government did to Oppenheimer during the MacCathy period: why and how. But because it was a biography (an investigation of how a personality was formed and how "it" behaved), this history told through the life of an individual also delved into his very personal unique experiences.

Q: *Fictitious elements are added to biography in a great many works now. In some cases, even important characters or events are invented. Some biographer even made believe stories that he befriended with the late biographical subject. Is this the trend? How do you define auto/biographical truth?*

KB: As a rule, there should be no room for fictitious characters in biography. But of course, all rules have their exceptions. So I know Edmund Morris was heavily criticized for introducing a fictional character (himself) in *Dutch*, his biography of Ronald Reagan. But he had some very good motivations. Reagan was an infuriatingly elusive subject. Confronted by this "empty vessel" of a man, Morris decided that he needed to use the voice of a novelist to speculate on his character. I am not sure he wholly succeeded, but I am entirely sympathetic to his particular biographer's dilemma. And while, as I have said, as a rule we biographers should not become novelists, we are obviously envious at times of their ability to use their imaginations to get a truer picture of the life at hand.

Q: *Indeed Edmund Morris deserves sympathy. Can we say the fictional figure that Morris used is simply a tool or a device for him to attain his aim? In this way what devices do you usually prefer?*

MJS: Yes, it was a tool to attain his aim. Unfortunately, it did not work well for

serious non-fiction. It is a device that the filmmaker Woody Allen invented for his delightful movie *Zelig* (where Zelig appears in many historical moments). It was a good device for a movie but less successful for Morris's biography. If he had been writing a fictional account of Reagan's presidency-like Gord Vidal's "Lincoln"—it would have worked better. I think I can speak for Kai by saying writing well and allowing the evidence to speak for itself is the best device.

Q: *Both journalists and biographers are supposed to be as objective as possible. Yet, in **American Prometheus** it is clear that your inclination reaches out to the reader. The word "Prometheus", to put it simply, discloses your stand. So the book sounds like an apologia. How do you define your identity in writing the biography?*

KB: The title for *American Prometheus* is taken from the ancient Greek myth about Prometheus who stole fire and gave it humankind. For this act of generosity, he was punished by Zeus. So yes, the title signals to the reader that we believe Oppenheimer became a victim of the right-wing McCarthyite political witch-hunt in 1954 — just nine years after he gave humankind the knowledge of the atomic bomb. So Prometheus is an apt metaphor. But we would deny that our narrative of Oppenheimer's life became an apologia. We write in great detail about his personal failures and lapses and we report in even greater detail about the charges leveled against him by his critics.

Q: *Memoirs, diaries, and interviews are indispensable in biography writing. Also, from the 1970s these become sub-genres in the larger category of life writing and seem to exert greater influence than auto/biography. What is your comment on this phenomenon?*

KB: Memoirs are indeed valuable to the historian and biographer. And yes, memoirs in recent times have acquired a certain popularity. But as your question suggests, memoirs are only one source alongside diaries, correspondence, official and unofficial records and oral interviews. All of these sources should be used by a good biographer to tell a nuanced and measured story. But memoirs or auto-biographies are obviously written from one point of view. I know this personally because I too have written a memoir, *Crossing Mandelbaum Gate: Coming of Age Between the Arabs and Israelis, 1956 – 1978*. So here is a slippery story about the unreliability of human memory—or even personal correspondence. When I was writing this memoir I had access to my mother's correspondence from these years. And so I would tell some of my stories, citing these letters. But when I shared with my mother these chapters, she would sometimes say, "Oh no, it did not happen that way." I would tell her, "But mother, that story comes from your own letter written at the time." But she was adamant: the letter was wrong, and her memory was correct. Who