

Response to "As Time Goes By: Creating Biography by Philip Furia

Before reading Philip Furia's essay "As Time Goes By: Creating Biography, I would never have thought about writing a biography myself. I very much enjoyed the few biography's I have read, especially one on the life of Vincent Van Gogh, but in no way did I imagine it being a creative writing adventure. I always thought they were written by researchers, not artists, either to piece together the life and times of a deceased person or to rake in the dollars by exposing the hidden life of a living one. I think everyone would like to write their own autobiography before they die, as Furia says "we like to write about ourselves" (Forche C, 2001, p. 67), but why would someone choose to spend their own life exploring someone else's? I thought about this question myself when I started reading and was unable to answer before Furia presented a reason. Before he took me there however he detoured into the three demons which inhibit biographers from treating narrative form with imagination. This was interesting in itself, but after he lists the three demons he then says, "but let's take a look at how the genre of biography has gotten itself into these narrative ruts" (Forche C, 2001, p. 68). I was forlorn at that point (actually drew a sad face next to it). His brief list of the three points had clarified them clearly in my mind, they all made perfect sense and I wanted to move on to "why write a biography" and "how to make it imaginative", please tell me Furia, Please! By reading his three brief descriptions, I could already see how you would automatically want to include every piece of information found out about the person in the book, life is complex and you might have spent hours sourcing the details. To miss anything out of someone's life because you don't think it is important sounds like sacrilege. Secondly, I could see how the amount of information collected would easily overwhelm and make you forget about framing

them around a main story. The threads running through someone's life are many and often interconnected, deciding on the most compelling one must be hard. Thirdly, it is so natural to tell and hear about a life in chronological order, it must be difficult and confusing to try and order it any other way. Furia's lengthy scenarios and historical examples did not enhance my clear vision of how we got into the ruts at all. Even when he touches on the difficulty of getting the truth in interviews, it again feels like he is explaining common sense. It actually made me laugh when I read, "a biographer should be able to condense the story he is telling about his subject into a couple of sentences" (Forche C, 2001, p. 73). He does that masterfully by listing steps one, two and three and then ruins all his good work with pages of lengthy explanation of each. He then continues to ruin this latest wise and concise sentence by doing the same - ouch!

Furia's essay did not really pick up my interest again until page 79 and the section "Words and Music: The Passion to Capture Other Lives". Here he explores his own reason for writing his musical biographies. But even here I feel he misses taking the opportunity to use his knowledge for more dramatic effect. His story begins with how the music background of his early student studies was burned into his memory. He tells you how his creation of interdisciplinary courses to help students understand poetry led to Fulbright professorship, and how not knowing the answer to a student's question led him back to his early music experience and eventually his passion. He tells all this chronologically :) In the section before this, he talks about the documentary film "I just keep on walking" which is "one of the most "moving" movies he has ever seen (Forche C, 2001, p. 77). The filmmaker inserts the poignant definitive moment of a mentally retarded woman's life, when her father put her in the institution thinking it was the best thing for her, at the end of the film for dramatic effect. When I read Furia's personal

tale he does not really attempt to connect the wonderful sequence of 'fateful' events that lead to him discovering his passion. It was all those "Album of the Months" sent to him automatically when he was a student because of his lax administration skills that gave him the music he was to later write about. Somehow I feel, if he had found a creative way to reveal this at the end of the story this sweet connection would not get so lost. He does capture the significance of his own "accidental" good luck in the Casablanca story of the song "As Time Goes By". But I am not even 100% sure he knows it. His line "It was fun to see him living out his youthful dreams as I was finally living mine" (Forche C, 2001, p. 84), makes me think he contributes his success to the enthusiastic student who became his publicist, not his earlier "accident" of how this genre of songs got burned into his brain. Maybe I am doing Furia an injustice, but the order he chose to put his story into is not the best. The early stuff gets lost and the Casablanca bit feels like an add on. The memory of the parental words "don't do as I do, do as I tell you" are burned in my own memory and coming up at this very moment.

I was amused again when Furia sought to answer my burning question about why biographers would want to spend so much of themselves and time writing about others, through his own story. I guess he is right, we like to write about ourselves :) When he talks about a Hollywood vamp biography that he feels should be written, he realizes that he is not the person "who burned to spend the next three years researching, interviewing and writing such a biography" (Forche C, 2001, p. 80). The biography that eventually brings him the self-effacing stenography and fame is molded deep within him, burned into his memory. I feel finding out about the lives of the artists that filled his head so long ago, meant finding out about himself. We are all on the same passionate journey of self-exploration and I think the

paths we choose to travel on are always going to lead us to ourselves eventually, even if we do it through the journeys of others.

It is Furia's own story of passion, not the way he writes it, that makes me feel writing a biography could be exciting. His conveyed knowledge has also made me see how it could be done in an imaginative, creative, dramatic way. His own writing however, captures none of the magic he paints for me. The essay starts wonderfully with him in creative writing mode, when he gives us a sensual image of the blast furnaces in Pittsburgh that he looked out to as he dreamt of becoming a writer. After that, I feel he fails to show the innovation and inspiration that he talks about and I'm sure if he reads this he will wish he "had handled chronology more imaginatively" (Forche C, 2001, p. 79).