

Biography: A Very Short Introduction
By Hermione Lee

Biography is one of the most popular, best-selling, and widely-read literary genres.

But why do certain people and historical events arouse so much interest? How can biographies be compared to works of history or fiction? Does a biography need to be true? Is it acceptable to omit or conceal things? Does the biographer need to personally know the subject? Must a biographer be subjective?

In this Very Short Introduction Hermione Lee considers the cultural and historical background of different types of biographies, looking at the factors that affect biographers and whether there are different strategies, ethics, and principles required for writing about one person compared to another. She also considers contemporary biographical publications and considers what kind of 'lives' are the most popular and in demand.

Questions for thought and discussion

- How would you define biography?
- Do you think there can be set rules for biography?
- Do you think there is such a thing as a definitive biography?
- What do you think are the particular challenges of writing literary biography?
- What do you expect from a good biography? What would disappoint you in reading a biography?
- Do you think biography should tell the whole truth?
- What do you think is the relationship between different kinds of "life-writing": diaries, memoirs, letters, autobiography, biography?
- Do you think biography has changed through time?
- What is the best example of a biography you can think of, and why?
- If you were writing a biography, what do you think would be the main problems and tasks, and what would you hope to achieve?
- Do you think biography is closer to fiction or to history?
- Do you think biographies of single figures are more interesting than those of groups?
- Could you have a biography of a river, or a city, or a disease?
- Do you think men's and women's lives have been written about in different ways, and if so, why?
- What do you think ethics and morality have to do with biography?

A Selection of Other Books by Hermione Lee

Hermione Lee: *Edith Wharton*
(Chatto & Windus and Knopf, 2007)

Hermione Lee: *Virginia Woolf*
(Vintage: 1996)

Hermione Lee: *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing*
(Pimlico 2008)