

Life lessons



A good biography demands attention to detail, good research skills and a great story. Three authors talk to **Mary Hogarth** about the secrets of their craft.

Writing a biography is difficult. It requires painstaking research, attention to detail plus the ability to get people to talk. Biographers also need a nose for a good story as well as a fascination for human nature to capture those quirky characteristics of their subject. Without memoirs we would lack valuable insights into those lives that have shaped the future. But what makes a good biographer? And how can new writers learn their craft?

Three experienced biographers – Geoffrey Wansell, Andrew Lownie and Vin Arthey give fascinating insight and share their expertise.

Find your subject

Geoffrey Wansell started as a journalist. Like most reporters, he prides himself on 'writing for the reader'. His first commission was a book on Sir James Goldsmith, which he reveals came about by accident while working on *Now!*, a weekly news magazine, owned by Sir James.

'While there I met Jimmy and thought what a fascinating figure, I want to write a book about him. Fortunately I had a contact who said he could find me a publisher.'

Like many starting out Geoffrey admits he didn't know how to write a biography. So he started by applying the same principles he used as national newspaper reporter and a feature writer. 'I began by creating a scene and sense of person to bring the characters alive. Because I am writing about

extraordinary people I try to always make characters come alive.'

Soon a commission for another memoir followed. 'It started with a phone call while writing the *Observer* Pendennis column. One of Cary Grant's contacts rang to ask if I would like to interview him. I was given a time at London address, along with instructions to press the bell marked B and ask for Carole. To my amazement Cary himself answered. After the interview I wanted to write about him.'

Writing is hard

Geoffrey moved to Los Angeles to do the Grant book and admits money was a concern. 'We did a house swap because at the time I had a young family and we were poor. Grant would never see me, but would phone me – he was very strange.

'Both the books did well so that's how it started and I found I could do it.'

Since then he has written numerous memoirs, including the definitive biography of Terrance Rattigan, and became vice president of the Terence Rattigan Society. It is the Rattigan book along with the two texts on Cary Grant that he is most proud of, because he was able to capture the essences of these enigmatic figures.

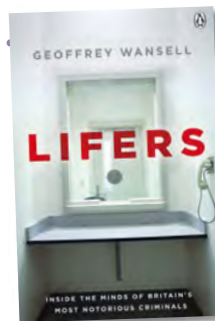
'I do vignettes of people,' he explains, adding that his books on murderers throw a light on what makes people tick. 'Each one has different revelations. Writing is hard work and people should remember that.'

When writing a life story it is essential



“”

Three essential skills every biographer needs are curiosity, bravery and determination.



to take an interest in those quirks and failures that define people and look at how they deal with that failure. 'Three essential skills every biographer needs are curiosity, bravery and determination.

Curiosity – writers need the ability to question all material presented.

Bravery is necessary because confronting people is not easy. Lastly, be determined, don't be put off or give up.'

Above all biographers must be able to write interesting prose. His advice to those wanting to write a biography is to find a subject and start, stating that a good ingredient is having a fresh insight. 'For example a publisher might ask do we really need a biography of Churchill? Yes they do if it is taken from a different angle. The writer must bring something extra and give it context. Writing a prologue or first chapter is a must. Have an example of what you are going to do. Be clear about what are you going to tell that's new.

'You must give a publisher a reason to want to commission the book.'

A strong narrative

Andrew Lownie, founder of the Biographer's Club, is a leading expert in the field. He held many roles before setting up the Andrew Lownie literary agency in 1988 – specialising in history and biography – including bookseller, publisher and journalist. The Biographers' Club began in September 1997 because as a literary agent he needed somewhere for his authors to meet film producers, publishers

and journalists.

‘It was an expensive business entertaining 20 to lunch but everyone thought it was a worthwhile networking exercise and said they would be prepared to pay their way,’ explains Andrew. ‘And so the Biographers’ Club was born.’

Since then the club has evolved. Passionate about encouraging new writers, he founded The Biographers’ Club Prize for the best uncommissioned proposal for a biography from a previously unpublished author in 1999. Two additional annual prizes followed in 2009.

Research and writing memoirs that others will want to read is tough, but the biggest challenge for a biographer, says Andrew, is constructing a readable, lucid narrative with pace. ‘It means a lot of research has to be jettisoned because it doesn’t fit the narrative.’

His first biography, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier*, was first published in 1995. Having read John Buchan as a child and enjoyed his books, Andrew wanted to write about him. ‘I realised there hadn’t been biography of him for thirty years. I was drawn to him as a highly complex man and versatile writer and because of a shared background and interests.’

Getting started

He begins a biography by reading all secondary literature and newspaper references, identifying possible interviewees and primary sources before working up a chronology. Andrew’s most memorable work is the recently published *Stalin’s Englishman: The Lives of Guy Burgess*. ‘It took thirty years to research because Guy was such a fascinating character.’

In his opinion a good biographer needs the ability to think outside the box as a researcher, write like a novelist and to allow the reader to make up their own mind about the subject. Reading other work is also essential. His inspiration has come from many biographers. ‘There are too many to mention, from Selina Hastings, Richard Holmes, Richard Davenport-Hines, Michael Bloch and Anne de Courcy to Sarah Bradford, Robert Lacey, John Campbell and Victoria Glendinning, Philip Ziegler and Jane Ridley.’

His advice to aspiring biographers? ‘Read widely as that will help you learn how to research and write,’ says Andrew,

now planning a book on Lord Mountbatten, which will examine new research and look at his relationship with the Royal Family and his reputation.

Life-changing experience

Debut biographer, Vin Arthey, chose a subject who has captivated him for nearly 55 years. His book, *Abel: The True Story of the Spy they Traded for Gary Powers*, focuses on Russian spy William Fisher, aka Colonel Rudolf Abel – one of the most extraordinary characters of the Cold War.

A Fellow of Teesside University, Vin – who holds a doctorate from the university for his work on KGB Colonel William Fisher – always wanted to be a writer. ‘I wrote plays and stories as a child. As a teenager I thought seriously about becoming a journalist, but was “put off”, and became a teacher. Conventional thinking suggested that this was the “proper job”. School teaching led me into higher education, which in turn took me into TV research and so into writing for a different medium.’

Writing a biography seemed like the next step. ‘To paraphrase Joseph Conrad, “biography chose me”. I’d been fascinated by the Abel story since childhood, and it was when I was working in regional TV in Newcastle that I discovered that this man’s real name was Fisher and that he had been born in England. I’d hoped to develop the regional TV idea into a network programme, but it wasn’t commissioned.’

The book deal came from an unlikely source. ‘The spy writer Nigel West was a research source for the TV programme. I told him that the network idea had come to nought adding, I’ve now got enough material to write a book. He said: “I hoped you were going to say that. A friend and I are starting a publishing company. Come and see us.”’

Because this was his first biography Vin used the conventional structure of birth to death, beginning by compiling



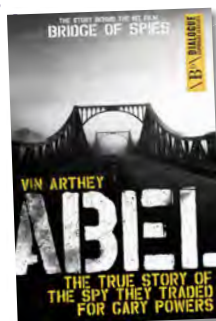
““

A lot of research has to be jettisoned because it doesn’t fit the narrative.



““

Even if they tell you ‘in confidence’ something that the whole world knows, don’t let on. Listen, and ask supplementary questions.



existing evidence he had amassed while working on the TV programme, before undertaking more research. ‘My TV background was a help, because researching the biography of a person within living memory involves interviewing, not just archive material.’

Writers’ block

Writers often find themselves staring at a blank page, but Vin avoided writer’s block with advice from a colleague who suggested starting with a writing exercise. ‘He recommended the “free writing” approach – just go to the keyboard or pick up a pen and simply write what comes into your mind for five minutes. Don’t stop or worry about spelling or punctuation. I found it a form of ‘play’, or like an athlete warming up before an event and that got me started.’

Now he starts every writing day with an exercise. ‘I try to vary what I do. One day might be a dream diary, another fifteen minutes of free writing. My best work is done in the morning, so I try to start early.’

Listening and treating your interviewees with respect are among the most important lessons Vin has learned. ‘Even if they tell you “in confidence” something that the whole world knows, don’t let on. Listen, and ask supplementary questions. They might have been dead for fifty years, but you must get to know them. And your biography must not be a card index of facts – it must be crafted.’

Abel was published to coincide with the release of Spielberg’s latest film, *Bridge of Spies*. It is fast becoming the definitive biography, taking the former television producer to New York spending two weeks on a panel at the Brooklyn Historical Society. It has, admits Vin, been a life-changing experience resulting in an enduring friendship with both the Donovan and Fisher families.

Like many new writers he admits lacking confidence at the start and worrying about having the stamina to complete the book. ‘Self belief is crucial,’ he says. ‘Get to know your subject. Write something that you would want to read, and that you know others would want to read. Prepare. Research.’ [WJ](#)