

# A BIOGRAPHER GOING ROGUE

M A R Y   D E A R B O R N

*Confessions of a Serial Biographer*

By Carl Rollyson

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“WHY MARY, I COULD TELL YOU ALL KINDS OF STORIES about Peggy Guggenheim—but they all would be gossip.” So said a woman who had known my most recent biographical subject intimately during Peggy’s years in Venice. I was rendered speechless, not only in chagrin over the stories she had evidently resolved not to tell me, but also because her misunderstanding of what biography is all about left me unable to let her know that it was precisely “gossip” that the biographer seeks.

Carl Rollyson, the author of the 1991 biography, *The Lives of Norman Mailer* (reprinted as *Norman Mailer: The Last Romantic*, in 2008), among many others, reveals as much in his fine *Confessions of a Serial Biographer*; he alludes to Plutarch, who famously said, “The most brilliant exploits often tell us nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man’s character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshaling great armies, or laying siege to cities.” He also summons Leon Edel, the great Henry James biographer who advocated the other extreme, calling biographies of lesser subjects than his “interminable gossip,” said only that an “obscure wound,” which may or may not have involved a bicycle, may or may not have affected James’s sexual life—which Edel accordingly did not describe, as if this “gossip” has no bearing on this great writer of novels about the human condition.

Rollyson's exploits as a self-described "biografiend" (the term is James Joyce's) are riveting for a fellow biographer, a nuts-and-bolts account that lays forth with wit and intelligence some of the biggest and most interesting issues in biographical work: authorized vs. unauthorized biography; issues of "fair use" in quotation, which can effectively hobble the biographer who does not have the cooperation of the subject's literary estate; how to deal with living subjects; and so forth. The reader will be transfixed by, for example, Rollyson's experience with Martha Gellhorn—who, aside from her literary and journalistic achievements, was Ernest Hemingway's third wife. Gellhorn hated and refused to cooperate with biographers, forbidding friends and colleagues to talk to Rollyson, yet showed herself to be extremely concerned with her legacy, to the point of insisting that she alone had the right to say what it was to be. Perhaps the most hair-raising experience recounted here was Rollyson's attempt by (with his wife and co-author, Lisa Paddock) to write the first biography of the then-living Susan Sontag. The formidable Sontag threw every possible obstacle in their way, painting their efforts as demonic and mustering legal and extralegal means to prevent their book from seeing the light of day. At one point Roger Straus of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Sontag's close friend and editor, called a colleague at W.W. Norton (Rollyson and Paddock's publisher) and effectively ordered him to, in Straus's words, "kill the fucker." (The book did come out, in 2008.)

Rollyson makes the excellent point that each biographical subject represents an entirely new universe for the biographer. "Embarking on each biography," writes Rollyson, "is like beginning the world anew." (5) Each has its own population (from professional contacts to aggrieved ex-lovers); locations (for Gellhorn, for example, St. Louis, Havana, Mexico, London, and points in between), emotional territory (the subject's life as child, spouse, friend, and parent), and of course her or his art. For this biographer, this was never more so than in my own life of Norman Mailer, published in 2000. From Harvard, the wartime Pacific, Provincetown, and Brooklyn, Mailer's story introduced me to all manner of characters. One film director I wanted to interview about his work with Mailer, demanded, bluntly, "What's in it for me?" In another sector of the Mailer universe, editor Tina Brown flat-out said that she would not talk to me because she wanted Norman to write for her new venture, the magazine *Talk*—as it turned out, not an uncommon response. I encountered one diabolically revengeful friend-turned-foe of Mailer who supplied many details of Norman's life in Provincetown in the

1970s and 1980s, detailing some stories about Norman as husband and family man that were among the most vicious remarks I've heard in my years as a biographer—way too vitriolic for me to use. Yet during my time in the Mailer world I met some fascinating, wonderful people who remain my friends today—from family members to Provincetown neighbors to literary colleagues.

Yet Rollyson has comparatively little to say about his time in the Mailer universe. As the author of a biography of Marilyn Monroe, he was drawn to Mailer because of his book *Marilyn*, which Rollyson very much admires. Although Mailer politely refused to meet with Rollyson or approve his project, a routine request for permission to quote from his work resulted in Mailer's agent demanding to vet Rollyson's manuscript. Mailer stepped in and not only gave his biographer permission to quote (without anyone vetting the manuscript) but specified Rollyson be charged the lowest possible fee to do so. The resulting biography, however, was, as one critic observed, "too fair to be really interesting."

Never again would such a thing be said of Rollyson's work: after *The Many Lives of Norman Mailer*, he took the gloves off. He describes with relish his relentless pursuit of reluctant interviewees, the tough questions he did not hesitate to ask, his dogged (and successful) attempts to get the inside story (as when he successfully prevailed upon PEN to produce its minutes from Sontag's presidency), the changefulness of key observers (when William Styron recanted a story that shed light on Mailer's stabbing of his wife). What makes *Confessions of a Serial Biographer* compelling is the vigor and often downright glee of Rollyson's tales of "going rogue" and breaking the established yet unspoken conventions of biography. Most biographers would support Rollyson in his questions about the value of the "authorized" biography that has the full cooperation of the subject or her or his estate; all too often those who give such authorization also demand to see and approve the result—which can sometimes lead to lifeless and toothless narratives. Yet Rollyson shows distinct pleasure when describing how Michael Foot, the British Labor Party politician, offered him the opportunity to write an authorized biography of his colorful wife, the film director Jill Craigie. A hair-raising adventure ensues, as Rollyson goes on to write, after his book about Craigie, a decidedly unauthorized biography of Foot himself. When Rollyson undertook a biography of the actor Walter Brennan (once a would-be actor himself), Rollyson received the unequivocal cooperation of everyone con-

nected with Brennan. The result was not one of his best. Rollyson shies away from his subject's virulently right-wing politics, giving this fascinating aspect of Brennan's life decidedly short shrift.

I share Rollyson's enthusiasm for what the biographer does, but any reader, I think, will find contagious the delight he takes in his adventures. In his simultaneous humility (it often behooves Rollyson to fade into the background) and pride (he will not give in on the important issues), Rollyson reveals himself as at once a likable and amusing fellow and an uncompromising practitioner of the art of biography.