

Writing Biography

Lorraine McLoughlin looks at some of the pitfalls on the way to writing biography.

People often tell me they have in mind to write someone's story – one day. 'What's stopping you?' I ask bluntly, even when the comments follow compliments about my biography of artist Barbara Robertson. 'Just start. Get on with it.'

Of course a commission to write a biography has lures to get you going, including publishing deadlines and payments. However, here are some general pitfalls on writing biography and a few tips on how to change the dream of an unbespoke manuscript into published reality.

The generally defined aims of biography are to

- discover the truth about a subject,
- be comprehensive about that person and
- bring an individual's story to life.

You must be clear who you are writing about, why and for what audience. Clarifying your focus will aid your selection from the copious research and information you accumulate. You can't include it all and still have a strong narrative that leads to page turning.

Telling everything you've found out might be boring as well as confusing, and could lose sight of the essence of the person. While you need to know enough about the subject to be able to sort what is important, it's helpful to remember Hemingway's iceberg theory for fiction that, while authors know their characters well, they show only ten percent. It may be more for biographers, of course, but good fiction rules still apply to biography such as showing not telling and shaping and selecting the material with a purpose.

For my book about Barbara Robertson I slanted the story towards her life as an artist and explained the times and artistic context in which she lived. After curating two exhibitions of her paintings and being amazed by the quality of her art, I knew I wanted to celebrate her work and bring it to the attention of the Australian art world.

It still proved a struggle to get to the truth about Barbara, in spite of my focus and expected audience. Although I was able to interview her, she was in her eighties by the time I did so. Her memories were often vague and her recollection of names and dates far from precise. Always self-effacing and private, she was not used to recounting her story and it was often hard to discern the right questions and which buttons to push. Trying to discover when she started teaching, I found a discrepancy between Education Department records and Barbara's recall. She seldom signed let alone dated her work and there were few records of who had bought past paintings, nor were there many photographs of her work.

Her live-in companion assisted in reconstructing some of the past dates upon which to lay the bones of my story. I followed up by seeking out family members and friends from school days, her time at teachers' college and then as an educator. Gallery owners and other artists also helped in my search and led to my locating paintings in private homes. When I returned to Barbara with photos of these paintings, she was as delighted as if recalling old acquaintances.

Talking with former colleagues and friends in Barbara's presence also helped with reviving her memories. Descriptions from other acquaintances swelled my understanding of Barbara's influence and her early and wide reputation, though I never found this out from the modest

teacher and artist herself. There was, however, the dilemma of getting objective comment about such a well-loved woman. I augmented my knowledge with research in state and interstate archives and newspapers, libraries and art galleries, but with limited success.

My searching questions to Barbara about what she did outside the formal hours of her training at the Victorian National Gallery of Art elicited few references to the emerging Bohemian café-life in Melbourne in the late 1940s, and brought only a few comments about fellow artists such as Perceval and Brack.

She did respond quickly, however, following remarks I reported from a former student about Barbara teaching ballet after school at Adelaide Girls High School. She leapt from her chair to find a dance photo taken while in her twenties. At last she revealed that in Melbourne she'd studied with Elizabeth Weiner, a renowned teacher of the Martha Graham School.

Yet at my mention of the plight of Aboriginal people, Barbara exploded into strong words about how Europeans had mistreated them. These people were often subjects of her painting, from her social realist work of the 1950s to using the face of David Gulpiil in her religious series of St Francis Australis in the 1980s. I was delighted to capture such language from Barbara in a filmed interview.

Sometimes factual gems, quotes and names of painting subjects came out when Barbara saw the book itself, though she hadn't remembered these pre-publication. How many opportunities I must have missed. How many half truths became facts, I wonder? Oh well.

Trying to be comprehensive about her life, I was hindered by limited access to Barbara by her overly protective carer and also my promise to Barbara not to be too personal. As she never married, I endeavoured to set her clearly within her wider family context. I was able to use wonderful photographs of her 1920s childhood taken by her father, a renowned photographer, and to recount warm anecdotal memories from living family members.

To put her into an art context, I used illustrative material about the art and teacher training places Barbara attended in South Australia, along with textual and photographic references to artists and friends of those times, and documented memories of colleagues and students. Her two years under William Dargie in Victoria are also illustrated by photos and reproductions of the work she did there.

Certainly a highlight of the book is the reproduction of her wonderful art works ranging from early works in the 1930s until the end of her painting career in 2000. These I placed in the context of art movements and her contemporaries and colleagues. To avoid the interpolation of art history and criticism interrupting the story line of Barbara's life, I placed these comments in boxes with a different coloured background so that I didn't interrupt the narrative flow.

In order to bring Barbara alive on the page, I followed Samuel Johnson's famous advice to collect domestic privacies, and add little known facts and anecdotes to reveal character. Apart from the passionate art depicted in her paintings and the revealing family photos, newspaper items helped, together with interesting asides about how she painted so that readers could picture her striding backwards

and forwards in her studio, and using mirrors to get different views of portrait subjects. I included a reproduction of her handwritten notes from lectures by Mary P Harris, who taught art history to many South Australian artists at the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts. Also included were Barbara's teenage sketches of Jean Harlow and Laurence Tibbett, both signed and sent back to her in the 1930s, along with a sketch that had annotations in the margin by her teacher, Ivor Hele. Influences and links between these people knitted the book into a whole, along with documented history of the various institutions.

An important adjunct to the book was capturing the living artist for posterity in a DVD of interviews when she was 87, along with a significant catalogue of many works. Sadly, she died within three years of those interviews.

As we are invariably wiser after the event, here are my ten personal tips for writing biography:

1. The shelves of the local library will reveal many styles of biography. While it helps to look at the approaches of other writers, in the end you must choose the style and manner with which to tell your story, one which suits the subject and is unique, fresh and readable.
2. It helps to have a passionate interest in your subject even while attempting to produce an objective story. Don't write about a person you can't bear as you need to share considerable time with them, whether or not you have a living subject.
3. To keep up the momentum of writing and research, just get the story down. Don't be overwhelmed by getting it right straight away. Being a perfectionist can inhibit you from starting, so give yourself permission to write rough drafts. You must write before you can rewrite. If you think of other ideas, beginnings and endings while writing, make separate notes so you stay focused and don't get distracted from your creative surge.
4. Research widely and ask numerous questions; think outside the square and follow many and various leads to unearth surprising treasures.
5. Set yourself timelines. Creating a realistic but definite end date for your project helps keep you focused and at your desk through any down periods. Perhaps you want to have it ready for a special occasion? Telling people it is coming can also keep you on task. Delaying could mean the people who knew your subject or the subject themselves may pass on, so perhaps a partial story is better than none at all. If you keep things in perspective, some evasive minor details need not stop you completing it.
6. Take care in shaping the story and giving it structure:
 - Being able to summarise your story into a brief outline and having a plan will assist your selection of information, boundaries and time lines, and keep the material relevant and in proportion. Prune to give it a clear shape.
 - Work out which characters to include and balance their part in the story according to their importance or influence.

- There is no need to start at birth and go through to death; put down all the stories and parts of stories as you find them; rearrange and fill in the gaps later.
- You may need to finish the first draft before you decide whether it will be chronological, told using flashbacks, or be thematic or circular – look for a good opening point. (Don't be surprised if you change several times how you frame and shape the story.)

7. Similarly, deciding on a title may come later: have a brainstorm once it's written; check out openings and titles in your library, think creatively but make sure it works for selling and isn't too obscure.

8. Review your work for consistent tense, dates, style, etc. And revise and revise. Being a good re-writer is more important than being a good writer. Now is the time for quality. I urge you to work with an editor and not to be afraid to throw out those pearls which shine but add little.

9. Aim to produce the best you can. Check and recheck details so that an early assumption doesn't become a supposed fact. Seek critical appraisal by someone you can trust, ask for editing and proof reading assistance, work with a graphic artist to make your words sing off the page, include visual material and consider adding a DVD.

10. Don't procrastinate. Get on with writing this story with the particular slants and passions only you can bring to it. It's your creation. Without you, there won't be this record, so take courage to tell your engrossing yarn with all the flair you can muster.

Lorraine McLoughlin is author of *Barbara Robertson: An Australian Artist's Life*. It was after curating an exhibition of the artist that she decided to write Barbara's biography. Lorraine and her artist partner collect art works in a haphazard way, care for their rural six acres, take pleasure in country and community life and enjoy reading, music and theatre. Currently, she is involved in the arts in the Yankalilla region south of Adelaide and was inaugural Artistic Director of its Leafy Sea Dragon Festival. Lorraine also set up the Books and Words Group, which organises local literary events for book lovers.

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