

The Influence and Inspiration of a Biography

A few years ago, I was browsing in the bookstore when I accidentally discovered a Writers Magazine that featured an interview with David McCullough. Since I had just finished McCullough's 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning biography about John Adams, the magazine caught my attention. So, I took the time to read this article. McCullough's interview was compelling. He compared the process of writing a biography to an artist painting a portrait. A painter, stroke by stroke, builds an image on canvas. In this painting, the subject is presented with an appropriate background. McCullough opined that writing a biography requires the author to convey, sentence by sentence, both the story of someone's life and the backdrop of circumstances that surrounded their journey through time.

Biographies have been a timeless source of reading pleasure and a form of study. For me, they are educational and inspirational because the torch of human nature passes before my eyes. Whenever I step back in time and walk a mile in another's shoes, I gain a deep appreciation for the challenges faced and the accomplishments they achieved. I sincerely believe there is a great profit to be gained. We can learn from another's experience if we reflectively think about their trials and tribulations. It is possible to inform our judgment and shape our disposition. If our focus moves beyond curiosity and we read with attention, we can translate this knowledge into a personal compass that is centered upon an enduring path of wisdom. This sense of discrimination or informed discretion will help us as we chart our own journey and navigate life's complex obstacles.

In a biography, depending upon the power of the lens within the author's microscope, at least three levels of perspective can be developed. Specifically, a well-researched biography will describe, to some degree, a detailed account of daily turmoil. Additionally, the author will identify currents of thought or major trends that shaped or defined five-to-ten year periods of time. The third level of analysis, generally, will use the advantage of hindsight and paint the big picture. This thoughtful reflection will outline career accomplishments or a major era of effort that characterized the fabric of one's personality. With this retrospect, the author connects episodic fragments of experience into a meaningful pattern that portrays the mosaic of their life's central purpose.

The power of history becomes evident when reading a biography. An excellent biography takes the reader beyond a straightforward explanation of historic proceedings. The author will present a snapshot of time but it will be explained within the distinctive texture of someone's interaction and interpretation of these events. Through the eyes of another person, history comes alive. Whenever I think-in-time, I discover important insights. Often I better understand the relevance of a particular occurrence, the legacy of unique time period or the context of a modern event.

There is a sense of inspiration that resides between the lines of every biography. Approximately 21 centuries ago, the great philosopher and politician, Cicero, remarked in a letter to a friend that you can discover great enjoyment while reading the story of another's life. I have experienced the wonder, suspense, joy, hope, fear and drama that Cicero noted in his correspondence.¹ Within a biography, I not only encounter a vast array of human emotions, but frequently find a parallel experience, problem or situation that closely resembles my frame of reference. Many times I encounter circumstances in a biography that match the present context of my daily life. I am inspired by another's persistence or

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motivated by their success. Often I am humbled by someone's selfless service or instructed by their failures. I am touched by their joy, feel their disappointment and understand their sorrow. And invariably, when I am finished with the book, I have gained some insights regarding human nature.

If you have not tried to read a biography, now is a great time to begin. Make a visit to your favorite bookstore and browse the biography section. Invariably, you will encounter a book cover with the name of someone you either admire or want to investigate. I also recommend that you channel some of your reading time and energy toward established biographies that have become classics. To get started with this quest, take a few minutes and visit The Pulitzer Prizes webpage at www.pulitzer.org. Biography and Autobiography Pulitzer awards have been given since 1917. On this website you will discover a wonderful inventory of distinguished American biographies. These books have been recognized for their excellence by the Pulitzer Prize review process. Regardless of your starting point, if you explore the genre of biographies, I am sure you will find, in the words of Cicero, a treasure chest "filled with the most delightful pleasure."²

¹ Suetonius, Lives of the Caesars, translated by Catharine Edwards; published by Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, page xvii.

² Ibid