Rollyson explains the art of biography.

Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College
Rollyson explains the art of biography

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.

College Talk

A fixture of any bookstore is the biography section. It seems that the general public has a fascination with the subject. And no matter how many times famous people have had their biographies written, there is always interest in learning more about them.

Someone who has been very successful as a biographer is Dr. Carl Rollyson. And he has an explanation for why there is such endless interest in the lives of famous people. “I think people read biographies simply to learn. I think it was (the writer Ralph Waldo) Emerson who said that biography is teaching by example. People want these examples,” he says, “and Emerson himself was a great one for teaching by example. People want these examples.”

Rollyson is a native of Miami, Florida, who got into the biography business by accident. “I certainly didn’t start out with the idea of becoming a biographer. I wanted to be an actor and I also did a lot of scholarly work and gradually it occurred to me, although I was very interested in history that my real concern, beginning with my work on William Faulkner, was with the characters’ lives,” he says.

A professor in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the College University of New York, Rollyson’s first biography was about a very well known personality.

“When a former professor of mine asked me to do a biography of Marilyn Monroe for a popular culture series, I thought well, let’s try this. Let’s try writing a narrative as opposed to scholarly articles and I fell in love with it,” Rollyson recounts.

“Back in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, there had been many books on Marilyn Monroe. Those books gave you sort of a general overview of her life, but what I was really interested in, because I was trained as an actor, was what could be said specifically about her life as an actress.”

Rollyson focused on the key roles she took on, the way she prepared for her acting assignments, the kind of actors and coaches she dealt with, and the methods she pursued, because there was a method to her acting. “That was something that either the other biographers weren’t interested in, or else they weren’t equipped by training to understand that aspect of her cinema performances.”

What most impressed him while researching Monroe was her ambition. “She wanted to be a great actress and this was an overwhelming ambition. She had this in common with all ambitious people—she was with the characters’ lives,” he says.

Among the things he discovered about Marylin that would be surprising even today: “She lifted weights and jogged at a time when no Hollywood actresses would do that. She was, in a sense, ahead of the curve in a number of different ways that are quite interesting,” explains Rollyson.

He has written dozens of biographical books and has been very successful in the field, so one wonders what the key to success is for a good biographer. “What makes a good biography above all is some kind of narrative. It doesn’t actually have to be a plot as in a novel, but there has to be a kind of driving force. The biographer has to have a very clear idea of why he or she is telling the story.”

“A biography is arranged, though it doesn’t have to be chronologically,” he added. “It, nevertheless, has to follow some kind of basic core or truth or pattern in the subject’s life. I think that’s what makes a biography. What makes a bad biography is that a biographer doesn’t know. On the other hand, I would turn it around and say there are things that the biographer knows that the subject knows can’t know. On the other hand, I would turn it around and say there are things that the biographer knows that the subject knows can’t know.”

Despite his tremendous success as an author, Rollyson is a modest man. “I’ve been very, very fortunate. I know many people who have started and couldn’t get a publishing contract, or learned (unpleasant) things about their subjects, or didn’t feel there was enough material, and so on.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: https://vimeo.com/190732527

He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu