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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 talking about the lives of people."

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 City 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 assign-



Photo by Yulia Rock

Dr. Rollyson in one of his classes.

ments, 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--that if you are truly ambitious, above all else, you're never satisfied," Rollyson said.

Among the things he discovered about Marilyn 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 essentially when the biographer keeps saying, 'look at what I found.' In other words, it becomes a kind of compendium, a kind of ragbag collection of data, which is useful for some readers but generally tends not to be very good reading."

Contrary to a common perception, writing a biography is hard work, not just a matter of putting together what others have written about the person in question. So here is his advice for those who would like to try the genre. "Read a lot of biographies. Take a look at the acknowledgments page to see how much work it is and what biographers say about how they learn things and what was difficult about the task. They have to understand the process of writing biography," says Rollyson.

Although he is not a historian, Rollyson--who obtained a doctorate in English from the University of Toronto in Canada--learned early on that you don't have to be particularly concerned with the things that you can't know or can't get access to as long as you can tell a story.

His opinions about how people recount their own lives are clear. "The problem with autobiography, with memoirs, is that they rely a lot on memory; it's not the same kind of research that a biographer does. I could tell you things about myself that nobody else could tell you, and that's why some people would say, well, you can't have a true biography because there are things the subject knows that the biographer can't know. On the other hand, I would turn it around and say there are things that the biographer knows that the subject of the biography 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."

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