

Biography: People (in the 920s) @ your library

“The Art of Biography
is different from Geography.
Geography is about Maps,
But Biography is about Chaps.”

—Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875–1956) *Biography for Beginners*

Experience teaches that gossip is a temptation that should be resisted, yet most people do find themselves drawn to stories about other human beings. A relatively safe and guiltless way to indulge this temptation is by reading biography. As the Victorian biographer Lytton Strachey wrote, “Discretion is not the better part of biography.” Who knows what secrets a biography will reveal? At least part of the attraction of biography is the way in which it describes either current or historical events as the experiences of individual human beings. Thomas Carlyle helped to explain this value of the genre in building an understanding of broader issues when he wrote, “History is the essence of innumerable biographies.” By reducing the complexities of history and other subjects to the actions of identifiable people, biographies sometimes make it easier for people to connect with the subjects about which they are reading.

Of course readers of biographies must have critical reading skills to recognize the limitations implicit in the telling of any person’s story. As Mark Twain warned in his autobiography, “Biographies are but the clothes and the buttons of the man—the biography of the man himself cannot be written.” Novelist Bernard Malamud’s skepticism about biography led him,

in *Dubin’s Lives*, to challenge its placement apart from novels and short stories: “The past exudes legend: one can’t make pure clay of time’s mud. There is no life that can be recaptured wholly; as it was. Which is to say that all biography is ultimately fiction.” Despite its limitations, biography remains a popular genre and it seems fitting that the 920 section of the library receive some special attention in an edition

of *The Teaching Librarian* dedicated to “people @ your library.” A few suggestions regarding resources and approaches to using biographies follow.

Elaine Fortune, a former CBE teacher-librarian, had students read biographies, then prepare introductions to the persons profiled as if they were introducing the person as a guest at a major event. Real life situation and application!

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Working in a secondary school library, I find the students’ choices of personalities for biography assignments both unpredictable and changeable. Therefore, we have tended not to purchase often expensive individual biographies, in favour of *Current Biography Yearbook* (ISBN 13: 9780824210748, H. W. Wilson Company, New York). Although admittedly American in focus, so are many of the personalities chosen by our students, who are influenced by American media. In the 2005 edition (my most recent) the selection ranges from Rachael Ray (television host and chef) to Tangerine Dream (German music group) to Tex Hall (president of the National Congress of American Indians) to Mos Def (musician) to