

American Biographies

Volume 1

The first in a series of *Bookmarks* evaluations of biographies.

With the popular success of "Founding Father" biographies in recent years, there is no stemming the tide of life stories hitting the shelves.

We asked Steve Weinberg to comment on the phenomenon of multiple biographies and to recommend vital reading on a few American subjects. Steve Weinberg is a newspaper reporter turned magazine writer turned book author. In addition to writing biographies, he has written a book about the changing nature of the craft. Weinberg lives in Columbia, Missouri.

BY STEVE WEINBERG

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years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, new biographies of the late president continue to fill bookshelves. The 2003 model, weighing in at more than 800 pages, is *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, written by professional historian Robert Dallek.

For casual readers of biographies, one biography of JFK is quite likely the limit. Should that one be Dallek's addition to the fray? What if a reader has already read a previous JFK biography? Is *An Unfinished Life* so revelatory in its new material? Unfortunately, readers can't get these answers from critics or biographers; too many reviewers and authors treat each new biography of the personage as if none had come before.

The reviews of *An Unfinished Life* provided some welcome exceptions to this rule. Dallek himself claims that the passage of time and the "availability of new materials — written contemporary documents, telephone and Oval Office tapes and entire oral histories or parts thereof — seemed ample reason to revisit Kennedy's personal and public lives." David L. Ulin of *Newsday* agrees, adding that "despite the billions of words written about him, JFK has never really existed for us as a three-dimensional human being," instead existing only as "a figure of myth and fantasy." Ulin praises Dallek for identifying "areas that until now remained largely in the background, material other biographers have overlooked," especially the precariousness of Kennedy's physical health from childhood through assassination.

KENNEDY • LINCOLN • KING

MONROE • HOOVER • AMERICAN LIVES

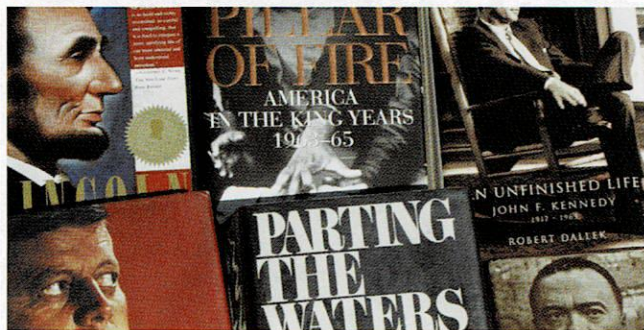


But even the best-intentioned reviewers traditionally lack the massive amounts of time it takes to figure out what each new version of a life adds to (or omits from) current knowledge. This is even a difficult task for biographers themselves. In 1989, Little, Brown published my biography of Armand Hammer, the first independent examination of his long, controversial life. After Hammer died, other biographies of him followed, and I accepted a review assignment of one. It took me, someone who had devoted seven years to researching Hammer's life, months of reading to figure out which of the new biographies contained the most previously unpublished material, and which contained the most significant omissions.

While this retrospective evaluation may be difficult, it ought to be obligatory for biographers and publishers to explain why a second, third or twentieth account is necessary. That type of discussion seems especially urgent when the subject of the biography has been dead for a century or more. How much new material could there possibly be? Common sense tells me, for example, that the new biographies of Benjamin Franklin, appearing year after year, contain little if any new factual material. If I am mistaken, I want the latest biographer to tell me quickly. If I am correct, I want to hear a mighty persuasive explanation why I should read a new Franklin biography to add to the one I read 25 years ago.

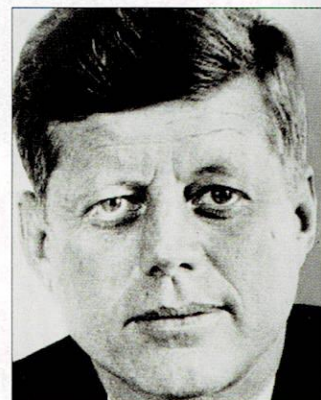
I question some of these revisionist efforts — the most intellectually honest biographies capture subjects as they lived in their own times, not as an author alive centuries later thinks they ought to have comported themselves. Certainly not every newly published biography must contain revelatory facts or views. If the biography's *raison d'être* is primarily the biographer's compelling style or personal affinity for the subject, all I ask is that the author disclose that this is the case. Then we must turn back to the critics — the best among them will assist readers with putting these stylistic differences in perspective. It is certainly possible, for instance, that the most compelling Franklin biography has yet to be written.

Here is a Bookmarks guide to multiple biographies of a few famous Americans.



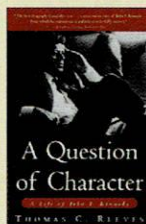
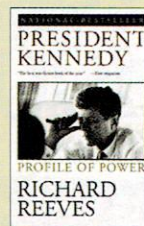
JOHN F. KENNEDY

Jack Newfield's review of *An Unfinished Life* in the *Los Angeles Times* dared to generalize about JFK biographies, placing each in one of three categories: "First came the Camelot wave of biographies romanticizing JFK. Then came the debunking backlash that lacked proportion and emphasized sex over substance. The third wave, beginning with



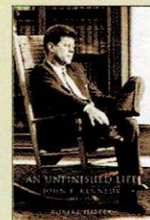
KENNEDY: RECOMMENDED READING

President Kennedy: Profile of Power BY RICHARD REEVES (1993). Still the Kennedy biography most tailored for a broad audience



A Question of Character BY THOMAS C. REEVES (1991). One of the last and certainly the best of the "revisionist" biographies.

An Unfinished Life BY ROBERT DALLEK (2003). More scholarly in tone than *Profile of Power* but with stunning revelations about the extent of Kennedy's health problems.



"To avoid the appearance of, ahem, pandering to the media with these medical and sexual revelations, Dallek has successfully avoided the preachy scolding of previous books of the same genre, such as historian Thomas C. Reeves' *A Question of Character*. However, Reeves' book and journalist Richard Reeves' landmark *President Kennedy* are still the two books to which I would send those curious about JFK. Maybe they could bind them together as the definitive single volume life of Kennedy."

Jack Ohman, *The Oregonian*.

"[Dallek's book] adds even more shadings, details and intimacy to the portrait. It gets to the bone and shows us the pain. Johnny, we know ye better now, thanks to this thoughtful and truthful biography." Jack Newfield, *Los Angeles Times*.

Richard Reeves's 1993 biography...began to provide serious scholarship, new information and a more detached perspective."

Obsessive readers can browse the long row of Kennedy biographies or study academic compilations such as historian James N. Giglio's *John F. Kennedy: A Bibliography*. Published by Greenwood Press in 1995, it includes 4,349 entries (not all books, needless to say) in its 425 pages. Giglio dislikes one of my favorite JFK biographies, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* by Thomas C. Reeves (Free Press, 1991), calling it "an overly damning portrait of Kennedy's character based largely on secondary sources." But one reason I like Reeves's version is his extended evaluation of secondary sources, including previous biographies. Reeves, a newly minted historian when Kennedy became president, says he "had no reason to doubt the early Kennedy literature. Though it was extremely adulatory, that approach seemed to fit the facts. The authors were those often closest to Kennedy; they based their accounts on personal recollections as well as documents. The credentials of, say, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Kennedy speech writer Theodore Sorensen were unassailable, their writings moving and brilliant." It was not until the mid-1970s, reading small amounts of revisionist history about Kennedy while researching a biography of Sen. Joe McCarthy, that Reeves began rethinking his viewpoint when a congressional investigation and other allegations began to cast doubt on Kennedy's character.

MARILYN MONROE

After this intriguing actress died at age 36 in 1962, biographies poured forth, some of them as quickie inexpensive paperbacks. Serious novelist/essayist Norman Mailer published a Marilyn Monroe biography during 1973 (*Marilyn: A Biography*). So did serious life writer Joan Mellen (*Marilyn Monroe*). In many ways, however, Anthony Summers stole the show when he published his blockbuster biography *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe* during 1985. His bibliography listed 40 previous books in English about the actress. Five had been published while she still lived; the other 35 appeared after her death. So why did Summers, a well-known British investigative journalist living in Ireland, decide to devote four years of his life to another book about Monroe?

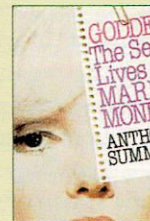


Well, in 1982, the Los Angeles district attorney announced he was re-investigating the circumstances of Monroe's death. Was it really an unassisted suicide? Summers received a magazine assignment. But, he writes, "I soon realized it would be pointless to tackle the death issue without long research. I also discovered, to my astonishment, that not a single author had attempted an in-depth examination of the actress' personal life, coupled with serious inquiries into her death and the alleged connection with the Kennedys."

Summers's biography is mostly a success. He occasionally makes statements that seem weakly supported by the evidence. That is more than a quibble from a fellow investigative journalist, but his overreaching is not fatal to the book's illuminating sections. Some post-Summers biographers came to rely heavily on his research. In 1992, entertainment journalists Peter Harry Brown and Patte B. Barham collaborated on *Marilyn: The Last Take*. Their source notes are impressive as they focus on the final 14 weeks of her life. They call Summers's book "the breakthrough account of Monroe's last years."

MONROE: RECOMMENDED READING

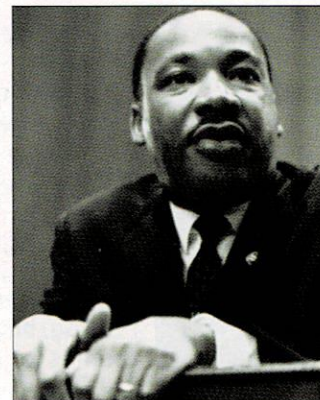
Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe BY ANTHONY SUMMERS (1985). No question, the first choice. Serious research and compelling writing.



Marilyn: The Last Take BY PETER HARRY BROWN AND PATTE B. BARHAM (1992). If one biography is not enough, authors Brown and Barham provide a solid focus on the weeks leading up to Monroe's death.

MARTIN L. KING, JR.

In quick succession in the late 1980s, two biographies of the Reverend Martin Luther King won Pulitzer Prizes. In 1987, David Garrow received the award for *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. Then in 1989, Taylor Branch won for the first of his three-volume history/biography *Parting the Waters: America in*



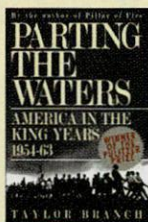
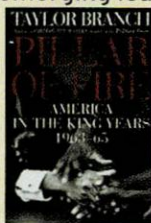
the *King Years 1954-1963*. Branch's work is often favored over Garrow's; *Bearing the Cross* is detailed enough to be occasionally overwhelming. While Branch's second volume, 1998's *Pillar of Fire*, was thematically weaker than *Parting the Waters*, his (unfinished) series remains the most compelling biography of King. Branch is currently at work on the third and final volume, *At Canaan's Edge*.

King is one of many oft-chronicled men and women featured in the *Penguin Lives* brief biography series; those books, by prominent authors, tend to be heavily dependent on already published, in-depth biographies because of the programmed brevity. Author Marshall Frady, within his 2002 life of King, admirably recounts his view of the King biographical enterprise in a note to *Penguin Lives*' readers.

"For this account, I have particularly mined from the reportage in several biographies. David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross*, which appeared in 1986 [and won a Pulitzer Prize], is a formidably compendious, if somewhat uninflected and metronomic, logging of King's almost weekly progress from Montgomery up to the instant of his death. One of the early, more intellectually ambitious reviews of King's ministry, though a bit cursory in narrative particulars and at times a touch professorially overly exegetical, is David Levering Lewis' *King*, the second edition appearing in 1978. In 1983, Stephen Oates produced a rather reverential but worthily diligent biography, *Let the Trumpet Sound*." But, Frady says, "Nothing so far has matched, in fully bodied, dramatic sweep of story, Taylor Branch's magisterial *America in the King Years* — especially the first volume, in 1988, *Parting the Waters*. Its mighty narrative surge tends to lose its way, in the second volume, *Pillar of Fire*, in the complicating thickets of the general American experience. But both are monumental as chronicles of the soul struggle and folk pageantry of the great Black Awakening and King's own agonies and splendors during that time." Frady goes on to mention 14 additional references.

MLK: RECOMMENDED READING

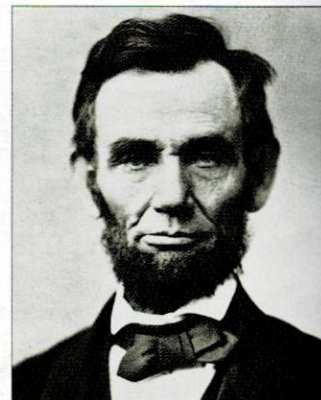
Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963 BY TAYLOR BRANCH (1988). A comprehensive look at the civil rights movement and its emerging leader.



Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965 BY TAYLOR BRANCH (1998). A strong follow-up to *Parting*, but often sacrifices themes for details.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Professional historian Stephen B. Oates wrote a full-length Lincoln biography, *With Malice Toward None* (1977), then followed it seven years later with *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths* (1984). In the prelude to the latter book, Oates makes some important distinctions for his readers:



Lincoln's 175th birthday in 1984 "is certain to cause an eruption of flatulent utterances about the sanctified figure and a shameless parade of scissors-and-paste Lincoln books with more pictures in them than print. Since in *With Malice Toward None* I immodestly undertook to write a Lincoln biography for this generation, I thought I might help commemorate his birthday by publishing a serious volume, one I have been writing in my head ever since my life of Lincoln came out."

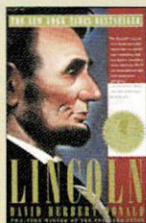
Oates explains how he came to new realizations about Lincoln while working on his Martin Luther King Jr. biography. "As I continued to read, write, lecture and talk about Lincoln, I realized how much I wanted to correct or clarify some of my earlier interpretations, realized how much more I had to say. Hence this book. In it, I have probed the galaxy of Lincoln myth and countermyth, a celestial world I find fascinating."

Oates catalogs some of the early Lincoln biographies—some treat him as a model human being and man of the people, others treat him as earthy and irreverent. Oates spends significant energy critiquing Carl Sandburg's multi-volume life *Abraham Lincoln*, which combines saintliness and folklore to create a "mythic figure." The Sandburg version captured the hearts of millions (and the Pulitzer Prize), but played loose with the facts, according to Oates. Every myth tends to generate a countermyth. That countermyth to Sandburg arrived with *Lincoln: The Man* by Edgar Lee Masters, Chicago lawyer-poet. Oates says Masters "portrayed Lincoln as an undersexed, slick and dastardly demagogue who could have avoided war, but instead crushed the South into submission..."

David Herbert Donald, a Harvard University historian, has been one of my favorite biographers ever since his insightful life of Thomas Wolfe, my favorite novelist, won a Pulitzer Prize. So when Donald published *Lincoln* in 1995, I looked forward to reading it.

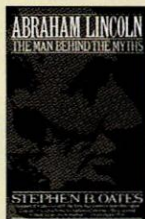
LINCOLN: RECOMMENDED READING

Lincoln BY DAVID HERBERT DONALD (1995). The first choice for a grand, modern, and detailed biography of Lincoln.



Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths BY STEPHEN B. OATES (1984).

While *With Malice Towards None* is a strong work as a biographical study, Oates's choices and commentary in this "second chance" biography are fascinating.



Donald is such a fine researcher and writer that he might have won me over even if he had failed to explain why he believed yet another Lincoln biography seemed appropriate. But of course he did, lucidly explaining at length how his biography is different from its seeming countless predecessors.

J. EDGAR HOOVER

A sound reason for a new biography of an oft-chronicled subject is a fresh interpretation of the inner life. But if readers are in the dark about how that new interpretation perhaps invalidates previous interpretations, much is lost in the telling. Perhaps the most egregious example in my experience revolves around the four biographies of J. Edgar Hoover published between 1987 and 1993.



The first of those was *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* by Richard Gid Powers. Powers mentioned only one previous Hoover biography, from 14 years earlier, and failed to explain how his differed from that one. I forgave Powers, though, because it had been a long time between books, the one from 14 years earlier had come to market soon after Hoover's death, and it was obvious that Powers had explored a great deal of newly available material.

I was less forgiving of version number two, published the next year: *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* by Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox. On page 16, the authors say, "The pub-

lic persona is well-known, almost a staple of the nation's mythology. It has been promulgated in a number of best-selling volumes...and debunked in others. But none of those books has come close to capturing the real J. Edgar Hoover." That sounded promising. Theoharis and Cox, however, then disappointed by naming only one of those many books, and even then merely in passing. As for the major Powers biography published a year earlier — nary a reference to it.

Curt Gentry wrote number three: *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets*. On page 804, Gentry briefly mentions an outdated book about Hoover. In the bibliography, there are entries for Powers and Theoharis/Cox. But nowhere is there an explanation for readers about why Gentry and Norton (another of my favorite publishers) decided to walk the path worn so recently by Powers and Theoharis/Cox.

The fourth Hoover biography during the six-year stretch, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, came from Anthony Summers — the same Anthony Summers who wrote the blockbuster Marilyn Monroe biography. Some of the new information, especially about Hoover's sexuality, seems unbelievable. How could Powers, Theoharis/Cox and Gentry, all superb researchers, have missed it? Because Summers includes the information, does that mean his version should trump the previous biographies? Summers never addresses those questions. He lists the three recent competing biographies in his bibliography, along with five additional previous lives of Hoover. But Summers supplies no help in evaluating one against the other.

In a close call, I recommend the Summers biography of Hoover with fewer reservations than I have concerning the versions of the others. This is one of those rare times, however, when my recommendation defies common practice and common sense. My advice would be that to understand Hoover as fully as possible, read all four of the sometimes contradictory accounts. What better way to grasp beyond forgetting how biographers working with essentially the same universe of information can write such different versions of the life as lived? ■

HOOVER: RECOMMENDED READING

Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover BY ANTHONY SUMMERS

(1993). Summers is a strong writer and offers considerably more information on the skeletons in Hoover's closet. With such revelations, though, he should have offered more commentary on his research and previous biographical efforts.

