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Introduction

Today we know an awful lot about the lives of our bestselling writers. Publishers demand that authors give readings, agree to be interviewed by journalists, attend literary festivals and write articles for newspapers and magazines. Most books include, at the very least, a few biographical details about the author – even if it is no more than a list of their previous works. Many writers, or their fans, have their own websites; some also write a ‘blog’ to help readers follow their working lives.

Such is the celebrity status of a few authors that they can make headlines beyond the literary pages of newspapers and magazines. The revelation that Ian McEwan had a long-lost brother was reported in many broadsheet newspapers, only a few weeks after claims that he had used phrases from a nurse’s memoir of the Second World War in his novel, *Atonement*. Arundhati Roy’s opposition to the Narmada Dam in India was widely reported and public burnings of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* stayed in the public eye for months. Newspapers recorded that Iris Murdoch’s brain had been donated for medical research and reports that scientists were studying how Alzheimer’s might have affected the language she used in her last novel raised fascinating questions for anyone interested in her work.

There is nothing new in the desire to know about the lives of famous authors and to speculate about how their life experiences may have influenced their work. What has changed over time is the way in which literary lives are portrayed, from the writer’s own account in an autobiography, letters or journal to an outsider’s version in the form of a literary biography.

*Writing Lives* aims to explore those changes, and the cultural and historical factors that have driven those changes. It examines how biography has evolved from Plutarch in the 1st and 2nd centuries to writers such as Doctor Johnson and James Bosworth in the 18th century. The book considers the conventions in different historical periods and the biographers who overturned or questioned those conventions. In what ways, for example, was Mrs Gaskell in the 19th century as groundbreaking as Lytton Strachey in the 20th?

While literary biography is at the heart of the book, *Writing Lives* also looks at autobiographies, journals and letter writing – each of which have their own stand-alone literary merits, as well as being vital tools for the biographer. This range of material should help the student to appreciate the sources available to the biographer and how they can be interpreted in different ways.

The texts chosen and referred to are primarily by English language writers, although they include writers from a wide range of nationalities, as most of the issues and moral dilemmas surrounding life writing transcend language. Many of
the extracts are taken from texts that may be hard to find; others have been chosen to encourage the student to read the text in its entirety.

*Writing Lives* sheds light on the biographer’s way of working and the choices they face when using the material they have gathered. The book aims to make the reader more critically aware of how life writing is created and the different forms it can take. It also poses questions about how life writing may evolve in future.

Biography, perhaps more than other genres, carries a moral imperative and *Writing Lives* encourages the reader to make up their own mind about whether that imperative has been met or transgressed. Oscar Wilde was clear where the biographer stood. In *The Critic as Artist* (1891) he wrote: ‘Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.’

Why are writers so wary of the biographer and should readers be just as sceptical? What did the biographer, Peter Ackroyd, mean when he said, ‘Every biography is a prisoner of its time’ and what are the factors that might affect the biographer’s approach to their subject? Is the reader on safer ground if they listen only to the autobiographical writings of the author?

This book will explore what exactly is meant by ‘life writing’ and look at the advantages and dangers of using it to interpret an author’s work. It will examine the areas where biography and fiction overlap and look at more recent developments in the genre. *Writing Lives* will provide an historical background to life writing but, with a few notable exceptions, focus mainly on texts written in the 19th century and later. The book aims to encourage students to revisit familiar texts armed with a deeper sense of the context in which the author wrote and to read new work with a fresh eye.
How this book is organised

Part 1: Reading life writing
Part 1 gives a chronological survey of life writing, stressing how different cultural approaches are used in different historical periods.

Part 2: Approaching the texts
This part examines the different forms of life writing and the challenge of writing about them in different contexts.

Part 3: Texts and extracts
Part 3 provides a range of extracts from life writing and other texts to illustrate points made in the book and to provide a focus for tasks and assignments.

Part 4: Critical approaches
This part explores the different ways that critics have responded to Alfred and Emily by Doris Lessing and other examples of her life writing.

Part 5: How to write about life writing
Part 5 considers the task of writing about different forms of life writing, and the different responses it can produce.

Part 6: Resources
This part contains a chronology of texts and writers discussed, together with guidance on further reading, and a glossary and index. (Terms which appear in the glossary are highlighted in bold type when they first appear in the main text.)

At different points throughout this book, and at the ends of Parts 1, 2, 4 and 5, there are tasks and assignments, designed to help the reader reflect on ideas discussed in the text. Where reference to a poem or prose extracts is followed by a page reference, the passage will be found in this book, usually in Part 3: Texts and extracts.