The "I" in Biography: The Role of First-Person Point of View When Writing the Lives of Others

and

Unlikely Terrorist: Camilla Hall and the Symbionese Liberation Army

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains both a creative and critical component. In the critical component, my research explores the ways in which contemporary American biographers use first-person narration in their work. My focus is on questions of technique, particularly the selection of personal details, the moments in which the "I" appears, the consistency of the "I," and the narrator's voice. I closely examine three works that use the first-person approach in different ways: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and Susan Griffin's short biography/memoir "Our Secret," which appears in *A Chorus of Stones.*

The creative component is titled *The Unlikely Terrorist: Camilla Hall and the Symbionese Liberation Army*, a book-length biography in which I include first-person narration. The book explores the life of Camilla Hall, a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army, which was a radical domestic terrorist group active in the United States from 1973-1975.

An important outcome of this research has been an increase in my understanding of the methods biographers use when inserting themselves into the stories of others. My critical research has shaped my creative writing and, I hope, will contribute to current scholarship about the place of first-person narration in biography.

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INTRODUCTION

For seven years I worked as a newspaper journalist, writing and editing articles about city government, breaking news, and people in my community. As a journalist, I wrote in the third person, trying to make myself invisible as a narrator. In time, I ventured into creative writing and published my first book, a memoir entitled *We'll Be the Last Ones to Let You Down: Memoir of a Gravedigger's Daughter* (2013). Now, having had experience writing nonfiction in the third person through my journalistic work, and experience writing in the first-person point of view in my memoir, I came to Bath Spa University with the aim of exploring the genre of biography, specifically how biographers insert themselves into the stories of others through first-person narration.

The biography I have written is the story of Camilla Hall, a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. The SLA was a small, but radically violent, organization that sprang from the chaos and unrest plaguing the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. One of their most famous acts was kidnapping Patricia Hearst, the daughter of a well-known newspaper publisher. Camilla[1] died in a violent shoot-out with Los Angeles police on May 17, 1974. Her story intrigued me because, like me, she had grown up in southern Minnesota. We also shared the experience of grieving the loss of family members at a young age. Camilla's three siblings preceded her in death. By the time she was 17 years old, she was the only surviving child in her family. My father died when I was 15 years old, an unexpected loss that clouded my late teen years.

Camilla was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, and as such seemed unlikely to choose to commit violent acts. She was raised in a social justice tradition based on Biblical teachings that emphasized helping the less fortunate. Camilla's father, George Hall, took his family to Africa where they stayed for nearly two years while he served as a missionary in Tanganyika (later, Tanzania). Camilla herself worked for a time as a county social worker in Minnesota, primarily assisting young, unwed mothers. She moved to Los Angeles in 1970 and then moved to the Bay Area in 1971. There, Camilla met Patricia Soltysik, who would become one of the founders of the SLA.

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[1] I should pause here to note that my intense intimacy with Camilla's life generated by years of research makes it feel natural for me to refer to her on a first-name basis.

A significant number of evidentiary gaps became apparent when I researched Camilla's life. The people who knew Camilla best—her parents, her sister, and her friend and lover, Soltysik—were dead. Newspaper accounts from the SLA era focused primarily on Hearst, its most famous member. Although I have had access to some of Camilla's letters to her parents, her artwork, her poetry, and other ephemera, much about her life and reasons behind her actions remain unknown. It was in these unknown spaces that I wanted to use a first-person approach. I saw it as a way to fill in the gaps with my thoughts and ideas about Camilla's life, a way to explore possible motives for her decisions, and a way of trying to understand Camilla through uncovering what she and I had in common.

The central question of my research is this: In what ways might I, as a contemporary American biographer, insert myself into the stories of the people I am writing about? How might I approach considerations regarding tone/voice, decide which personal details to include, as well as decide how I will balance empathy and distance? When I began my research into biography, I examined a wide range of books in which the author used first-person narration. These included (listed alphabetically by author): *Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left* (2003) by Susan Braudy; *Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town* (2010) by Elyssa East; *Who She Was* (2005) by Samuel Freedman; *Strength in What Remains* (2009) by Tracy Kidder; *Into the Wild* (1996) by Jon Krakauer; *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990) by Janet Malcolm; *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* (2014) by Marja Mills; *The Orchid Thief* (2000) by Susan Orlean; *Truth and Beauty* (2004) by Ann Patchett; *Visiting Tom* (2012) by Michael Perry; *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) by Rebecca Skloot; *Remembering Denny* (1993) by Calvin Trillin; and *A Book of Reasons* (1999) by John Vernon.

Many of the authors knew their subjects. Braudy wrote about Kathy Boudin, a former college roommate who became involved in domestic U.S. terrorism in the 1960s. Freedman wrote about his mother. Kidder wrote about a refugee he knew in New York City. Malcolm wrote about her relationship with a man imprisoned for murder. Mills wrote about living next to the famous novelist, Harper Lee. Orlean wrote about a man she knew who collected orchids. Patchett wrote about her friend, the writer Lucy Grealy. Perry wrote about his neighbor. Trillin wrote about a man he went to college with. Vernon wrote about his brother. While I found these books

engaging and compelling, the relationships between the different biographers and their subjects did not parallel my own experience as a writer, largely because my subject died the year I was born. For this reason, I chose to concentrate my research on biographies in which the authors did not have a prior relationship with their subjects, and in which the subjects were no longer alive. The biographies which have been most formative to my own practice, and which I therefore discuss in the most detail in this critical research, are Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and Susan Griffin's "Our Secret," in which she writes about Heinrich Himmler. Though Griffin's work may seem anomalous because it is not book-length, I chose it because her voice is consistently present throughout the piece. I would go so far as to say that her voice, her speaking "I," is more insistent, deeply personal, and oft-used than Krakauer's or Skloot's. My rationale for selecting these three texts is the wide range of narrator voices they have allowed me to analyse. This research is augmented throughout by scholarly works that explicitly address first-person narration in the craft of writing biography.

This approach—using first-person narration when writing about someone else—is not one I have undertaken prior to this point. This is perhaps a surprising, and maybe even embarrassing admission, given how long this approach has been used by biographers. However, my reluctance was the result of years of journalistic training, which taught me to strive for objectivity. Journalists who report on the lives of others are told to keep themselves out of the story and let the subjects speak for themselves. Noted narrative radio storyteller Ira Glass, who hosts "This American Life," writes in 2007's *The New Kings of Nonfiction* about a colleague who was trained in the same way I was: "She always had the same explanation for why she'd omit the entertaining details [from her reports]: 'I thought that would be putting myself in the story.'"[2]

A brief history of my background illustrates my interest in nonfiction and my desire to use an approach that, though new to me, is far from new. News reports have captivated me from a young age. I grew up in rural Minnesota in the 1980s, and our television received only five channels. The TV in our house was almost always turned on. This meant that several times during the day, my family and I watched local or national news programs. My dad also brought home one or two newspapers

[2] Glass, Ira (ed.). *The New Kings of Nonfiction*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 3.

each day, which I eagerly read. I had always enjoyed writing, and the frequent news access I had in my house piqued my interest in true stories. Through the television and newspapers, I saw the drama and conflict of major events: John Lennon's death, the Iran-Contra affair, and the Challenger space shuttle disaster. Thousands of smaller dramas played out daily on the news and captured my interest.

At university, I majored in journalism. My professors taught me the "inverted pyramid" formula for writing news stories. In the inverted pyramid, the most newsworthy facts appear in the first paragraph, and information follows in order of newsworthiness. According to Mitchell Stephens, author of *A History of News,* "The inverted pyramid organizes stories not around ideas or chronologies but around facts. It weights and shuffles the various pieces of information, focusing with remarkable single-mindedness on their relative news value."[3] I never thought to question this formula, which strongly emphasized an objective approach. My textbooks quoted people like Lawrence Gobright, an Associated Press correspondent, who said in 1861: "My business is to communicate facts; my instructions do not allow me to make any comment upon the facts which I communicate…I therefore confine myself to what I consider legitimate news."[4] Stephens goes on to say: "Facts—a quotation here, a number there—shine through these hierarchical columns of information, but the temporal, historical, atmospheric or ideological connections between these facts are often weakened, occasionally severed."[5] My books said things like, "When journalists talk about objectivity, they mean that the news story is free of the reporter's opinion or feelings, that it contains facts and that the account is written by an impartial and independent observer"[6] and "objective journalism is the reporting of the visible and verifiable."[7] The public is watching for any sign of bias: "One of the most cutting epithets the public hurls at journalists is that we are 'biased' or 'nonobjective.' Most journalists try hard to earn public trust by being objective in their coverage."[8]

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[3] Stephens, Mitchell. *A History of News* (3rd ed.). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 242.
[4] Mencher, Melvin. *Melvin Mencher's News Reporting and Editing*. (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2007), 50.
[5] Stephens, pp. 242-243.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 51.
[8] Brooks, Brian, James L. Pinson, and Jean Gaddy Wilson. *Working With Words: A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors*. (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's, 2012), 237.

Somewhat contradictorily, but at the same time intriguing to me, my university professors also talked about nonfiction writers who took a more narrative approach to journalism. Gay Talese, John McPhee, and Joan Didion—American writers who were part of the group labeled the "New Journalists" in the 1960s—wrote outside of the rules that had guided reporters such as Gobright. They included their own thoughts, feelings, and observations in their reports, which still were solidly grounded in research. I found this approach tantalising.

In beginning the course of my undergraduate studies, I believed—rather naively, looking back on it—that journalistic objectivity could be attained. I believed the writer could be largely invisible. But as I neared graduation, I started to think about the varied ways a writer could approach nonfiction. This burgeoning curiosity was temporarily quelled after graduation, when I started a job as a reporter for a small daily newspaper. My editors expected me to write news reports as objectively as possible: articles that aligned more closely with Gobright's ideas for journalism rather than Talese's ideas of what journalism could look like. I also had to write several articles each week under tight deadlines, which did not leave much time for creativity and exploration.

Around the age of 25, I started to work on a personal writing project, which was a memoir based on my experiences growing up as a gravedigger's daughter in southern Minnesota. I spent thirteen years taking a nonfiction approach to my own life. I have always worked in the nonfiction form and I feel passionately toward it. I began my PhD in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University after spending years investigating Hall's life—looking through old newspapers, examining letters she had written to her parents, and reading recollections typed up by her father. Now that I had all of this primary source material, I had to decide how to weave it together into a biography. I thought this would be a good opportunity to take the skills I developed as a newspaper reporter and combine them with the first-person approach to telling a life story that I had used in my memoir.

Camilla is not a well-known figure and therefore much of her life is a mystery. To fill in evidential gaps, I wanted to use what I knew about Camilla's life to explore her state of mind and what might have prompted her radical actions at the end of her life. I wanted to write a biography that offered my own analysis and observation, which would provide a perspective on Camilla that readers cannot get by reading about her on her Wikipedia page or by reading the few books about the

SLA, which inevitably focus on high-profile Patricia Hearst. I also wanted to explain to readers why I became interested in Camilla's story. I felt an immediate connection to Camilla the first time I saw her picture in a newspaper. I developed a tremendous sympathy for her parents, whose four children had all preceded them in death.

I decided that trying to explain this connection I felt with Camilla could be accomplished by using first-person narration. I wanted to report on her life much in the way that Talese, McPhee, and Didion reported on the lives of others, where they inserted their feelings toward and reactions to their subjects. I wanted to contemplate and meditate on what I saw as bigger issues readers could identify with when learning about Camilla's story. These issues included faith, activism, and what it means to have passion for a cause. Ultimately, I wanted to attempt to answer questions of why Camilla made the choices she did. Why did she make the decision to join a violent band of revolutionaries, when she had shown no violent tendencies until that point?

Going into this project, I knew I would need to closely examine examples to see how authors have used first-person narration in biography. I also knew I would need to overcome my undergraduate training and journalism experience and learn to be more confident when using the first-person point of view when writing about someone else. In *The New Kings of Nonfiction*, Ira Glass continues talking about his colleague who aimed for objectivity at all times: "As if being interesting and expressing any trace of a human personality would somehow distract from the nonstop flow of facts she assumed her listeners were craving. There's a whole class of reporters—especially ones who went to journalism school, by the way—who have a strange kind of religious conviction about this. They actually get indignant; it's an affront to them when a reporter tries to amuse himself and his audience."[9]

What I hoped to accomplish in writing *The Unlikely Terrorist* was to inhabit the research on Camilla, to infuse it with my personality and insights as a way to intensify my level of insight and involvement in her life. By doing so, I realized I would have to relinquish the detachment I had practiced in my years of journalistic work.

In Chapter 1 of this critical research, I put into context the use of first-person narration in biography by looking at some of the key moments in its history. I

[9] Glass, 3.

explain what I see as benefits of first-person narration in biography, as well as some of the challenges this approach poses.

In Chapter 2, I present an in-depth analysis of first-person narration in biography in three works by Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin, concentrating on questions of voice, where the narrator is placed within the works, and personal details revealed by the authors.

Chapter 3 includes an explanation of how my research has informed *The Unlikely Terrorist*. I examine the decisions I have made while writing and show how the works of Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin have influenced my own work.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I tie all my analysis and findings together and reach an ultimate conclusion about my research and its impact on my creative work.

CHAPTER 1:

FIRST-PERSON NARRATION IN BIOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"'My God, how does one write a Biography?' Virginia Woolf's question haunts her own biographers."[10]

Thus begins Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf. In this self-referential approach, Lee starts the biography not with the beginning of Woolf's life. Instead, she spends several pages ruminating on the genre of biography and the author's role when writing the life of someone else. Lee, as the narrator, makes an appearance on the first page, candidly revealing her feelings as she embarked upon the writing process: "There are many times, writing this, when I have been afraid of Virginia Woolf. I think I would have been afraid of meeting her. I am afraid of not being intelligent enough for her. Reading and writing her life, I am often afraid (or, in one of the words she used most about her mental states, 'apprehensive') *for* her."[11] The biographer Lee comes across as vulnerable and honest, revealing the feelings she has toward her subject.

This example (which I will come back to later in this paper) is one of many examples of how first-person narration has been used in biography. I cite it at the outset of this study because for a writer of Lee's stature to signpost her own uncertainty as a biographer somehow gives me permission to grapple with my own. She legitimizes the whole enterprise of a biographer's self-referentiality and self-consciousness right there on the page. This approach deserves a close analysis because there is little sustained and developed thinking about the topic located in one place. In my examination, I identify some techniques biographers use. Writers who use first-person narration in biography make decisions regarding tone, where and how often the "I" appears in the work, selection of personal details to include, and narrator distance. Analyzing these examples—both historical and modern, British and American—has elucidated my own creative work.

Decisions regarding tone/voice

One of the earliest examples of biographical writing using first person narration is John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*. Written in the late 17th century, and first

[10] Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 3.
[11] Ibid.

published in the early 18th century after Aubrey's death, "Aubrey's were the first biographies that did not point to a moral; in fact, they were really a record of his unselfconscious gossip with his friends."[12] Up until that point, biographies largely focused on a subject's accomplishments or family history. The "lives of great men" included stories about "battles, conquests, victories in government and argument, dominance over the populace, the imparting of wisdom, influential deeds and sayings."[13]

Aubrey's tone makes it seem as if one is eavesdropping on a conversation between friends in a café. Most of the short profiles are of people he did not know, with the purpose of setting the lives of well-known men (and a scant few women) on paper for the historical record. For the subjects Aubrey did not know, he relied on word-of-mouth information. It is likely that we can attribute the gossipy tone of *Brief Lives* to this research method. He frequently uses the "I" perspective: "I have now forgott what Mr. Bushel sayd…"[14] or "Sir John Danvers told me…"[15] or "I have heard some say, e.g. my cosen Elizabeth Falkner…"[16] or "…I have heard my grandmother say, who was her neighbor…"[17] His voice affects honesty. If he does not know something, or if he has forgotten a detail, he says that, but frequently this is a mask to stop the reader from noticing his other sleights of hand. As a reader, I am seduced by his seemingly forthright voice. Though I can see how to some readers, Aubrey can come across as arrogant, seen as trying to impress readers by "name dropping" and having inside information. His repetitive insistence of his connection to his sources are there to establish authority. He shows the reader that he has done his research, however unreliable his sources may be. His rhetoric is designed to position him as an involved and trusted presence, one who is not afraid to start conversations and ask questions in pursuit of knowledge.

When Aubrey did have a relationship with his subjects, he makes that clear. Of Edward Davenant he says: "He was my singular good friend, and to whom I have been more beholding then to any one beside; for I borrowed five hundred pounds of

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[12] Dick, Oliver Lawson (ed.). *Aubrey's Brief Lives*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1957), cxii.
[13] Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.
[14] Dick, 10.
[15] Ibid., 80.
[16] Ibid., 101
[17] Ibid., 41.

him for a yeare and a halfe, and I could not fasten any interest on him."[18] He writes of Walter Rumsey, a lawyer: "He was one of my Councell in my Law-suites in Breaconshire about the Entaile: he had a kindnesse for me and invited me to his house, and told me a great many fine things, both naturall and antiquarian."[19]

This immediacy brings a reader directly into that time and place. Aubrey did not provide merely physical descriptions. He chose details specific to his relationship with the subjects, often quirky, thereby challenging the notion of what constitutes a written life. The stories in *Brief Lives* are deeply personal and often unreliable, the hand of the biographer evident on nearly every page. Some of the entries are exceedingly short, comprised of just one small story rather than anything approaching the scope of an entire life. Some of the shortest sketches in *Brief Lives* include those for Edmund Bonner, John Colet, and William Harcourt. Harcourt's entire life is summed up in one paragraph about his petrified kidney, which a butcher's boy retrieved out of a fire. It was "like an Agate polished," Aubrey wrote. He added, "I have seen it. He [the butcher's boy] much values it."[20] This particular detail gives readers the illusion that a privileged friend is talking to them—a friend who knows something about the subject and has access to people and information that readers could never attain. I cannot help but doubt, though, whether Aubrey really did see that kidney. The insistence seems overdone but he brings his subject matter to life vividly, nonetheless. I question Aubrey's research techniques, as did his contemporaries: "His fellow historians looked askance at some of these methods," writes Oliver Lawson Dick.[21] But whatever his readers' views are of his credibility, Aubrey's interventions in the evolution of biography cannot be ignored.

Another book that challenged notions of biography appeared in 1744—Samuel Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers*. This was one of the first biographies written in which the biographer had an intimate relationship with his subject. Richard Holmes, in 1993's *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, says the book has "underlying psychological drama" due to "the difference between the two degrees of knowledge—the love of the friend and the

[18] Ibid., 84.
[19] Ibid., 264.
[20] Ibid., 122.
[21] Ibid., lx.

judgement of the biographer."[22]

But it is Johnson's fascination with and admiration for his subject that results in a distinct impression that the full, honest story of Savage's life is not being told. Johnson's account portrays Savage as entirely sympathetic, even though he went on trial for murder and spent his last days in jail for an unpaid debt. Near the beginning, Johnson enters the story expressly to set his intention for the biography: "To these mournful Narratives, I am about to add the Life of Richard Savage, a Man whose Writings entitle him to an eminent Rank in the Classes of Learning, and whose Misfortunes claim a Degree of Compassion, not always due to the unhappy, as they were often the Consequences of the Crimes of others, rather than his own."[23]

Throughout the biography, readers are made to feel sympathetic to Savage's plight. Johnson assigns Savage the role of "outcast poet." He portrays Savage as someone who has overcome great odds yet found success as an author. For example, Savage felt abandoned by his mother—even though the woman he thought was his mother may not have been. According to Johnson, Savage was merely defending himself when he stabbed a man at a tavern. But according to witness accounts, Savage may have had intent to murder. Johnson portrays Savage as one who needs help from his friends but is at times turned away by their coldness.

Although Johnson is trying hard to laud his friend, it is not difficult to read between the lines. Johnson is trying to create a myth out of Savage, but I question the narrative he has created. I found the scene in which Savage confronts Lady Macclesfield, the woman he thinks is his mother, troublesome. According to Johnson, Savage merely wanted to talk to her. But even though the biography is friendly toward Savage, I still saw a man entering this woman's house in the dead of night, going into her bedroom and frightening her half to death. I also saw a man with bad manners who took advantage of the generosity of friends.

Was this Johnson's intent? Did he know that readers would see through his praise, constructing an alternative narrative? Perhaps it is this struggle of how to tell the story that readers find so fascinating. The "love of the friend" prompted Johnson to write a laudatory account, yet the "judgement of the biographer" may be why a reader like me picks up on a subtext that paints Savage as a somewhat dangerous, unreliable, and uncouth individual.

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[22] Holmes, Richard. *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 194.
[23] Tracy, Clarence (ed.). *Life of Savage*. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1971), 4.

Johnson struggles to find his voice. He seems torn as to whether he should let Savage's story speak for itself, or insert his views and judgments in order to create a likable and sympathetic persona. In *Brief Lives*, by contrast, Aubrey's voice is insistent, a reminder on nearly every page that he is there. He does not want readers to forget that he is part of the stories he is writing, too. How subtle or overt that "I" voice is a decision biographers make.

An example of a subtler narrator voice is Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf*. Apart from the introduction mentioned earlier, Lee rarely uses the "I" throughout the 700-plus pages of the biography. Unlike Aubrey, who knew some of his subjects, or Johnson, who knew his subject well for two years, Lee did not have a relationship with her subject. Lee had a wealth of research materials to draw upon—including letters, newspaper articles, Woolf's own writing, and previous books written about Woolf. Lee, then, draws upon the heavy research and relies less on her own voice to create the story of Woolf. Unlike Johnson, Lee is not out to craft a particular persona for Woolf. In fact, she is fighting to confront previously accepted storylines about Woolf. Even with the preponderance of documentation of Woolf's life, Woolf still has become a mythologised figure, ranging from "a tragic woman," "the fragile writer," and "the mad genius." Lee acknowledges these myths and fights against them. "Virginia Woolf doesn't have a life, she has lives. In the fifty-five years since her death, she has been rewritten by each generation, and appropriated by different and competing readings."[24]

Though Lee does not often refer to herself, that does not mean she does not show her intent as a biographer. Whereas it is difficult to ascertain for certain Aubrey and Johnson's intentions, Lee is more forthcoming in her goals. For example, in Chapter 5, "Childhood," she gathers evidence about Woolf's childhood and her relationships with family members. This chapter includes much speculation on Lee's part regarding Laura Stephen, Virginia's half-sister. Laura is a rather mysterious figure, having been committed to a psychiatric hospital as a young adult. But Lee as an author speculates and makes it her duty to draw conclusions from the scant evidence. She uses phrases like "my reading of the evidence suggests not a sadistic patriarchal conspiracy, but an unimaginative and disciplinarian response to the dilemma of caring for a child who was suffering from a mental disability,

[24] Lee, Hermione. "Biomythographers: Rewriting the Lives of Virginia Woolf." *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April 1996, 107.

possibly a form of autism, which may have been inherited from either side of the family."[25]

At times, even with a wealth of evidence, Lee weighs in on how to make sense of it all, especially the parts of Woolf's life that receive the most attention from fans and biographers—such as her marriage to Leonard, her bouts with depression, and her relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Of the relationship with Vita, Lee writes: "And so the friendship with Vita, which is extremely well documented, opens up the tricky relationship between evidence and facts."[26] Lee is overtly critical of those who want to interpret this complex relationship in only simplistic terms: "Simplified readings of Vita 'as' Orlando or of Mrs. Dalloway's bisexual and virginal marriage as straightforward representations of Vita Sackville-West's own life won't do."[27] Of Woolf's husband, Leonard, she warns: "It would be a mistake, fatal to the understanding of the Woolf marriage, to read Leonard Woolf simply as a cold, obstructive disciplinarian. He was a person of deep, articulate, excitable feelings, controlled by fierce self-training."[28]

Lee is not writing a hagiography. She does not singularly focus on Woolf's accomplishments or portray her as a saint. Like a scientist, Lee gathers as much evidence as possible and makes what she determines are logical conclusions about Woolf's life. To do this, she brings herself into the writing to guide readers in the process. She recognizes that Woolf is a complex figure and knows that readers will interpret evidence differently. As a biographer, she gives her educated opinion yet leaves room for reader interpretation. She uses words such as "it seems" or "perhaps" to let readers know what she is thinking, but those words leave room for other possibilities. Put less generously, such words stop her from committing herself.

Yet Lee's voice is for the most part forthright, and her evidence and scholarship extensive, leading me to trust her much more than I trust Aubrey or Johnson. I never feel that Lee is trying to mislead me, and only rarely feel that she is insisting too vehemently on a particular persona for Woolf. She often lets the research speak for itself and if there are any doubts or questions, that is when she appears in the narrative as a biographer to guide the reader through different

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[25] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 102.
[26] Ibid., 480.
[27] Ibid., 485.
[28] Ibid., 334.

possibilities.

The "I" voice in biography can be predominantly gossipy like Aubrey, laudatory like Johnson, authoritative like Lee, or anything in between. The biographer makes decisions on who he/she is going to be. The writer Janet Malcolm asserts that the "I" is an invented character, not representative of the author as a person. In nonfiction, she says the "I" "…is an over-reliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation…He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life."[29] She goes on to say: "Nevertheless, readers who readily accept the idea that the narrator in a work of fiction is not the same person as the author of the book will stubbornly resist the idea of the invented 'I' of journalism; and even among journalists, there are those who have trouble sorting themselves out from the Superman of their texts."[30] This statement resonates powerfully with me, seeming to capture what is essential about my own biographical enterprise.

Sometimes the "I" in biography is entirely fictional. In "The New Biography," Virginia Woolf argued for a blend of fiction and truth, which she called a "queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow."[31] Lee says that Woolf "insists on the imagination's right to make play with historical data. She freely mixes historical information, quotation and guesswork, to make vividly impressionistic character sketches of the dead."[32]

Biographers throughout the twentieth century can be found creating fictional first-person characters. *Dutch*, the 2000 biography of U.S. President Ronald Reagan by Edmund Morris, slid deeply into fictional territory when Morris made himself a character in the biography. This character is side-by-side with Reagan throughout his life and even enters into dialogue with him. Morris, as Reagan's authorized biographer, had unprecedented access to Reagan, presidential documents, and the president's confidantes. Yet based on that documentation, he chose to create a wholly imaginative work that, perhaps counterintuitively, remains classified as nonfiction in bookstores and libraries. Other examples abound. The Israeli psychologist and writer Amia Lieblich employed a dual narrative and engaged in a

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[29] Malcolm, Janet. *The Journalist and the Murderer.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990),160.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Woolf, Virginia. "The Art of Biography." *Virginia Woolf: Collected Essays, Vol. IV.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 235.
[32] Lee, "Biomythographers," 4.

fictional conversation with her subject, the poet Dvora Baron, in her 1997 book *Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer*. Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1991) is another example, in which Ackroyd writes himself into Dickens' life and imagines encounters with the novelist.

The decision regarding the narrator's voice in biography is an intensely personal one. I am not comfortable fictionalizing myself as a narrator in my biography of Camilla Hall or making up information about Camilla that I know definitively not to be true. But I respect each biographer's decision to approach her work in whatever way she thinks will best illuminate her subject's life, and I appreciate the diversity of their methods. Aubrey, Johnson, and Lee all have different narrator voices, but each one is consistent within an individual work, a trait that, to my thinking, is important. It would be difficult to trust Lee as a narrator, for example, if she started the Woolf biography grounded deeply in research, but midway through the book switched to the gossipy tone of Aubrey. Or if Lee suddenly appeared as a character alongside Woolf after creating a narrator distance. My goal as a biographer is to decide upon a voice as a narrator, determine who the "I" is going to be, and make that voice consistent throughout the biography.

Selection of personal details

Biographers who use first-person narration are in essence revealing something about themselves. But the degree of personal revelation differs from author to author. First-person narration in biography does not necessarily bring about full disclosure about the author's life. For example, the case of Johnson writing the life of Savage is curious when one examines how much the reader ends up learning about Johnson himself, which is not very much. Johnson was actually a close friend of Savage's for about two years, but Johnson does not reveal this in the book. For example, Johnson writes of Savage's "night walks," but portrays Savage as walking alone, when in fact Johnson often accompanied Savage on his walks. Holmes calls it an "invisible friendship."[33] Johnson does not seem interested in examining his own life in relation to his friend. His light touch and desire to stay out of the story results in Savage looking like a lone figure, an outcast, which helps Johnson promote the myth he is building and mask his personal stake in—and consequent manipulation

[33] Holmes, 35.

of—the material: his own bias. Johnson acts as if he were actually a witness to Savage's last days, as Savage languished in jail. We see Savage in action, Johnson an omniscent narrator: "His Time was spent in the Prison for the most part in the Study, or in receiving Visits; but sometimes he descended to lower Amusements, and diverted himself in the Kitchen with the Conversation of the Criminals; for it was not pleasing to him to be much without Company, and though he was very capable of a judicious Choice, he was often contented with the first that offered…"[34] Johnson is drawing upon information from letters Savage wrote, and as a result "Johnson now writes as if he were standing by Savage's shoulder."[35]

Besides the beginning of the book, we glimpse Johnson as a first-person narrator only briefly again toward the end, actually interacting with his subject, when Savage leaves London for Wales. Johnson writes he "…parted from the Author of this Narrative with Tears in His Eyes."[36] While the phrasing is slightly unclear—is it Savage or Johnson who has tears in his eyes?—margin notes that Johnson left on his original manuscript say "I had then a slight fever,"[37] which makes it sound as if Johnson were giving an excuse for why he cried at Savage's departure.

This is an example where more personal detail from the biographer could shed light upon the subject. As Holmes pointed out, the fact that Johnson and Savage were friends made this a unique biography for the time. That influence is there, even if it is not overt. But as a reader, I do not know they are friends from reading the biography. I know this only from other sources, such as Holmes and James Boswell. Personal information has been purposely withheld in order to create a particular myth of the subject. It leaves me wondering who Savage really was.

In *Brief Lives*, Aubrey as a narrator is a more consistent presence than Johnson, but he does not include many personal details aside from divulging how he knows his subjects or who he has talked to in order to conduct his research. He is focused on his subjects and highlights them and their accomplishments and does not distract readers with his own narrative. When his "I" enters the stories, it is only to give an opinion about his subjects. Lawson Dick, in his introduction to *Brief Lives*, says "…the unerring skill with which he chose just that episode in a man's life when

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[34] Tracy, 133.
[35] Holmes, 218.
[36] Tracy, 114.
[37] Ibid., 114.

his personality was most extravagantly in bloom, gives even the shortest of his biographies a vividness which has never been excelled."[38] We might go so far as to say that it is the skill of the novelist or short story writer as much as that of the biographer. If Aubrey had stepped into the narratives with more personal details, perhaps readers would not get that sense of "bloom" that Lawson Dick observed. It requires skill and deftness to determine when personal details may expand a subject's narrative or shed light upon it, and also to recognize when the personal voice may overshadow the subject. A further analysis of this issue continues in Chapter 2.

Reasons for using a first-person approach in biography

Authors have many reasons for using first-person narration in biography. I would like to concentrate on two of my own here, because they resonate with me and were powerfully formative in my approach to writing about Camilla Hall. First, I used the first-person approach to serve as a guide for the reader, by being clear about my expertise on Camilla. Second, I wanted to illuminate aspects of Camilla's life by referring to my own life, in a hope of cultivating empathy for my subject.

The role of a dependable guide becomes critical in today's age of easy access to information. One can learn the basic facts of almost anyone's life quickly through the Internet. Even a simple search for my own subject turns up a surprising amount of information. Besides the Wikipedia entry on Camilla, one also can find details about Hall documents housed at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota (where Camilla's father had taught), images, newspaper articles, and blog posts written by various interested parties. Within a few hours, anyone can glean the basic facts about Camilla's life. And this is for an "ordinary" subject with little name recognition. The information available on someone more renowned, such as the SLA's most famous member, Patricia Hearst, a political figure such as Winston Churchill, or a literary celebrity such as Virginia Woolf, is overwhelming. As Lee "contemplated the transatlantically scattered hoards of manuscripts and letters, diaries and notebooks" of Woolf's, she was overcome by "periodic attacks of archive-faintness."[39]

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[38] Dick, cix.
[39] Lee, Virginia Woolf, 4.

Hans Renders, co-editor of *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, writes, "The simple facts have become easily accessible, and for that we no longer need a biographer. But the interpretive biography faces a golden future. ... The need for an authentic story to be told can only increase."[40] In an interpretive biography, the author brings a personal perspective to a subject's life that cannot be found elsewhere. Holmes writes that "…no biography is ever 'definitive,'…every life story can be endlessly retold and interpreted…"[41]

Holmes considers an approach to biography that fuses the roles of scholar and storyteller: "All good biographers struggle with a particular tension between the scholarly drive to assemble facts as dispassionately as possible and the novelistic urge to find shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life. Both instincts are vital, and a biography is dead without either of them. We make sense of life by establishing 'significant' facts, and by telling 'revealing' stories with them. But the two processes are rarely in perfect balance or harmony."[42] Holmes put this into practice in *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, a biography where he set out to explore and blend those two roles. In that book, Holmes is an accomplished guide. He sets forth "significant facts" about Johnson and Savage that were unknown to a general readership. But he also crafts a story, bringing life and emotion to his characters. Holmes leads me to discover new facts about the Johnson and Savage friendship while giving me his educated opinions on the unusual friendship and reasons why Johnson may have written the book with such a laudatory tone. For me, *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* achieves a harmonious blend of fact and story.

In regards to empathy, Holmes calls it a biographer's "most valuable" weapon.[43] For Holmes, the time he has spent researching a subject, metaphorically living alongside him for several years, cannot be discounted and indeed, becomes part of the story. Holmes uses a two-sided notebook approach. On one side, he records the fruits of his research. On the other side, he documents his feelings and observations about his discoveries. Through his examination of his feelings during research, Holmes can explore the relationship he has with his subject and allow

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[40] Renders, Hans, and Binne de Haan. *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*. (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2013), 62.
[41] Holmes, Richard. *The Long Pursuit*. (New York: Pantheon, 2017), 57.
[42] Ibid., 60.
[43] Ibid., 6.

feelings of empathy to emerge. I have taken a similar approach. I kept a Word document journal in which I recorded the thoughts, ideas, and feelings I had as I conducted research on Camilla, and I used this to inform my writing.

But in the same sentence that Holmes calls empathy a "most valuable" weapon, he also calls it a "perilous" weapon.[44] This dichotomy is interesting. Empathy can prevent a biographer's voice from becoming cold and distant. But empathy can become perilous if a biographer is so empathetic that it clouds his judgment. If a biographer becomes too close to his subject, distance that allows for seeing the complex characteristics could get lost. An example of balanced empathy is Lee's biography of Woolf. Lee portrays Woolf in all her complexities—cultivating empathy while writing about Woolf's nervous breakdowns, but not excusing Woolf for her sometimes haughty and judgemental attitudes. An example of empathy that goes too far is Johnson's biography of Savage. Johnson is so concerned that the reader have empathy for this "poor, outcast poet" that Savage is not portrayed as anything but that. As Holmes notes in *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, the penultimate paragraph of *Life of Savage* was the original ending of the book, and reflects the empathetic tone of the entire book. This paragraph "urges empathy before judgement."[45] However, a more judgemental paragraph stands presently as the ending. Holmes writes that he believes Johnson received pressure from social mores of the time to end on a more moral note, which better reflected the nature of contemporary biography at the time.

The need for authorial distance?

Some writers advocate for authorial distance in biography. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, who wrote books about Anna Freud and Hannah Arendt in the late 20th century, suggests that biographers should be almost invisible on the page. She says, "Others foreground themselves—as the biographer—so that you feel them in the texts making judgments. The biographer steps right into the biography. You feel the biographer making judgments, putting material together, telling the story. I am of completely the opposite school of thought—that you should not appear in the biography at all, that the reader should feel as though no one wrote it, and that they

[44] Ibid., 6.
[45] Holmes, *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage*, 227.

should simply feel that the story is completely compatible with the subject's life."[46]

One example of this distance can be found in Samuel G. Freedman's *Who She Was: My Search for My Mother's Life* (2005). Freedman, a professor of journalism and former reporter for *The New York Times*, only wrote what he knew about his mother or what he could verify through research. I imagine him revising Holmes' approach to note-taking by keeping notes only on one side of his notebook and never exploring his feelings regarding his research. "I felt that the line was so porous that it needed to be reestablished, and that if you're going to have the advantages of nonfiction, which is the power of truth, then you have to keep your responsibility to truth also."[47] But Freedman is so concerned about distance and retracing his mother's steps that his book takes on a strange tone of an impartial observer of this woman's life, rather than that of a son who had a loving relationship with his mother. Going back to the idea of a biographical narrator who is a creation (as Janet Malcolm contends), we can say it was Freedman the journalist who wrote this book, not Freedman the son. While Lee argues that there is no such thing as an entirely neutral biographical narrative,[48] Freedman is attempting neutrality as much as possible in service of his goal to write about his mother only what he could document. But the mere selection of what facts to include says something about the narrator. As Humphrey Carter writes: "...[W]hat you're looking for is going to say more about you than about the subject. You're always bringing your own agenda to it."[49]

The assertion that biographers should not imprint their voices or personalities upon the work, that they should become as invisible as possible, makes it difficult for biography to have its own "great tradition" of authors as one finds in other literary genres, such as novels and memoir. [50] While some readers may choose to read biographies because of the author and not the subject (I would pick up any biography written by Richard Holmes, Erik Larsen, Hermione Lee, Jon Krakauer, Susan Orlean, Stacy Schiff, and Gay Talese), others may choose to read a biography because of their

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[46] Mandell, Gail Porter. *Life Into Art: Conversations with Seven Contemporary Biographers*. (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 178-79.
[47] Freedman, Samuel G. *Who She Was: My Search For My Mother's Life.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 329.
[48] Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, 134.
[49] Batchelor, John (ed.). *The Art of Literary Biography*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 268.
[50] Holmes, *This Long Pursuit*, 54.

interest in the subject. For Holmes, this presents a challenge to the genre, as he wryly states: "This seems to imply that most biographies are defined crucially by their subject-matter, and don't really have a significant authorial status for the reading public. Essentially, biographies are understood to write themselves, self-generated (like methane clouds) by their dead subjects."[51]

Some biographers admit directly to the reader that they will appear as a character and why. This type of clear statement of intent is something that journalism professor Doug Underwood advocates in *The Undeclared War Between Journalism and Fiction*. He says that most writers who deviate from standard journalistic fare "believed in being up front with their audience about what writing methods they were using and giving signals so that readers could distinguish the empirical from the imaginative or speculative elements of their works."[52]

Richard Holmes is clear with readers in his 1974 book *Shelley: The Pursuit*. He begins: "There will always be Shelley lovers, but this book is not for them. …That fluttering apparition is not to be found here, where a darker and more earthly, crueler and more capable figure moves with swift pace through a bizarre though sometimes astonishingly beautiful landscape."[53] Likewise, Lee spends the entire first chapter of her Woolf biography writing about her role as a biographer and the challenges that poses.

Michael Mott, who wrote a 1984 book about the 20th century monk and writer Thomas Merton, talks about that "magical distance" in biography. "If you're too close, a lot of things get blurred. If you're too distant, well, what's the point of the thing, anyway? That's very difficult, finding the right distance. In a way we're all trying to find that magic distance. We're all trying to get out of solipsism. If you see yourself as the center of the universe, then you're blind to yourself as well as everything else, it seems to me. Yet very few of us can practice detachment, sufficient detachment to see things in focus, not the detachment of indifference."[54]

I understand the need for some biographical distance. While my own subject, Camilla Hall, did many good things in her life, such as fighting for women's equality and working to help young, unwed mothers get back on their feet, I needed to have

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[51] Holmes, Ibid.
[52] Underwood, Doug. *The Undeclared War Between Journalism and Fiction: Journalists as Genre Benders in Literary History*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.
[53] Holmes, Richard. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974), ix.
[54] Mandell, 97.

some distance so I could evaluate all of her decisions, both the good and the bad. Yet, I knew that I did not want to write a biography where the distance was so great that I appeared "cold" as a biographer. Freedman's book did not engage me when I read it; I did not appreciate the estrangement he had as a narrator from his subject. As a result, his book lacks empathy and the balance between fact and story that Holmes advocates. After surveying the first-person narration in biography, I gained a clearer sense of my own biographical voice and what I wanted to achieve as a biographer. As such, I chose to conduct a thorough reading of three works that I felt most closely represented the type of biography I wanted to write, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: EXAMPLES OF APPROACHES TO THE NARRATOR'S VOICE IN BIOGRAPHY

I have chosen to conduct a thorough reading of three creative works that have been formative to my own approach to biography. This close examination of the narrator's role in biography helped me make decisions about my authorial presence in my creative work. I have not included examples of authors who write about themselves while simultaneously writing about family members or close friends. Books that fall into this category include Samuel G. Freedman's *Who She Was*, in which he writes about his mother; Ann Patchett's *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship*, in which she writes about a close friend; and John Vernon's *A Book of Reasons*, a book about his brother. Books written about family members or friends more closely fit the definition of memoir than biography because the writer knows the subject well, and is actually part of the story. As such, it becomes almost impossible to not include a significant amount of personal detail. I did not have a personal relationship with my subject. My desire to write about Camilla Hall was borne out of pure interest and increased identification with her the more I learned about her. In this way, the examples I have chosen are more representative of the biography I have written. The books are also part of the modern American biography genre, again representative of the biography I have written. I have restricted myself to three examples, though there are many more, due to space constraints and considerations of scope.

Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996) is a biography of Chris McCandless, a young man found dead in the Alaskan wilderness in 1992; Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) is an investigation into the woman whose cells have been the basis for scientific research for several decades. Finally, Susan Griffin's "Our Secret" (1992) is a novella-length work in which she braids together a biography of Heinrich Himmler, slices of memoir, interviews with war survivors, and information about missiles. These are all popular and critically acclaimed works of nonfiction. *Into the Wild* and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* spent weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *A Chorus of Stones*, in which "Our Secret" appears, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. Even though all of these authors use first-person narration to tell the story of others, the works are markedly different from each other.

For example, they differ in the use of personal details, the empathy they hold for their subjects, and the tone the narrator voice takes.

Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

Into the Wild started as an article for *Outside* magazine in 1993, where Krakauer worked as a freelance journalist. In the book, as well as the article, readers see him journey from one location to another, from one interview to another, as he tries to retrace McCandless's steps and solve the mystery of his death. When Krakauer expanded the article into a book, he offered more personal details, such as information about his own life as an adventurer and explorer when he was in his early twenties.

Krakauer slips into his personal story about two-thirds of the way into the book. Up until that point, readers have been given an account of Chris McCandless's life. Krakauer's voice is distinct throughout the book, much like Lee's voice in *Virginia Woolf*, but he does not overtly insert himself into the narrative. That changes in Chapter 14. Here, he transitions into full-fledged memoir. Krakauer details his own fascination with outdoor adventure and the foolhardy risks he took when he was a young rock climber: "My suspicion that McCandless's death was unplanned, that it was a terrible accident, comes from reading those few documents he left behind and from listening to the men and women who spent time with him over the final year of his life. But my sense of Chris McCandless's intentions comes, too, from a more personal perspective."[55]

Krakauer spends two chapters, approximately twenty-three pages (eleven percent of the book) detailing his own adventures, namely a treacherous solo climb of Devils Thumb in Alaska, a protuberance jutting from the Stikine Ice Cap. In Chapter 15, Krakauer briefly details his relationship with his father. He describes Lewis Krakauer this way: "My father was a volatile, extremely complicated person, possessed of a brash demeanor that masked deep insecurities. If he ever in his entire life admitted to being wrong, I wasn't there to witness it."[56] It is clear Krakauer brings in information about his father because before this point, Krakauer has written about the relationship McCandless had with his father. McCandless was a son trying to break free of his family, a young man at odds with the values embraced by his

[55] Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 134.
[56] Ibid., 147.

father and a victim of paternal "brash demeanor," much like Krakauer. By offering his story in parallel to his subject's story, Krakauer is trying to understand the decisions that McCandless made. How had Krakauer's own complicated relationship with his father driven his (at times) reckless decisions? How close had Krakauer himself come to dying in the wilderness because of his youthful adventures? Krakauer was twenty-three years old when he climbed Devils Thumb; McCandless was twenty-two when he died.

> At that stage of my youth, death remained as abstract a concept as non-Euclidiean geometry or marriage. I didn't yet appreciate its terrible finality or the havoc it could wreak on those who'd entrusted the deceased with their hearts. I was stirred by the dark mystery of mortality. I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sign of something in the glimpse, some forbidden and elemental riddle that was no less compelling than the sweet, hidden petals of a woman's sex. In my case—and, I believe, in the case of Chris McCandless—that was a very different thing from wanting to die.[57]

Of course, we will never know for certain what McCandless was thinking when he set off on his adventures, nor what drove him to take risks. But what Krakauer can do is share his own story, aiming to bring insight to what goes into making youthful decisions. Krakauer takes an educated, imaginative leap to think that McCandless saw the same mix of wonder and fear when he entered the wild, uninhabited parts of nature.

While Krakauer's personal story is intriguing and serves as an effective parallel to the subject's life, its placement feels slightly like an awkward interjection. The shift to overt first-person narration and personal details two-thirds of the way through the book interrupts what had been up to that point a smooth narrative of McCandless's life. However, there is value in waiting to reveal the personal story. By this point in the book, readers have a thorough understanding of who McCandless was and what may have driven him to his wayfaring life. It appears that Krakauer wanted readers to first know McCandless before coming in with his own story.

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[57] Ibid., 156.

When Krakauer writes that McCandless likely was not on a suicide mission, that he simply was overcome with curiosity and wonder, the reader finds this believable. For one, a reader can see that Krakauer has already proved that he's done his research on McCandless. And second, Krakauer puts his own story in parallel with McCandless. If Krakauer at age 23 is thinking these things when climbing a mountain, then it is not a stretch to think that McCandless as a 22-year-old also seeking adventure might have viewed nature in a similar way.

Krakauer himself says in his author's note that he was simply not able to be a distant biographer. He traces the footsteps of McCandless, much as Holmes is known for tracing the path of his subjects. Holmes realizes that by doing this, it is impossible to not feel empathy for the subject and to not have that empathy come across the page. Krakauer realizes this, too: "I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried—and largely succeeded, I think—to minimize my authorial presence. But let the reader be warned: I interrupt McCandless's story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless."[58]

Michael Sheldon, who took an empathetic approach when writing *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* in 1991, says this at the beginning of the book: "That character must come to life on the page, not through some literary trickery, but by the biographer's willingness to look at the world through the subject's eyes, and to convey that experience to the reader. It requires an extension of sympathy and imagination, but that does not mean inventing information or withholding criticism. At its most basic level, it is simply the act of one person trying to understand another person's life."[59] Based on this quotation, Krakauer is successful. He makes no apologies for being empathetic with his subject. But he is not so empathetic that he overlooks McCandless's weaknesses. Krakauer makes it clear that at times, his subject was brash, naïve, and had problems communicating with his family.

Krakauer's tone is one of an expert guide. His revelation that he had experiences similar to McCandless, in addition to his well-documented research,

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[58] Ibid., n.p.

[59] Averill, "Empathy, Externality and Character in Biography: A Consideration of the Authorized Versions of George Orwell." *Clio*, vol. 31, no. 1, Fall 2001, 16.

gives his voice an air of authority. In this way, his voice is similar to Lee in her biography of Virginia Woolf. Both biographers offer educated opinions on what may have happened when the facts are either hard to find or when accounts differ from each other. Krakauer's use of tone, personal details, and lack of narrator impartiality appears to be a successful formula for *Into the Wild*.

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot traces the life of the woman whose cells have sustained medical research ever since they were harvested (without her consent) in 1951. For years, the Lacks family had no idea that "HeLa" cells existed and that medical companies were profiting from medications and other discoveries that stemmed from research that used HeLa cells. The mystery of the woman who spawned trillions and trillions of HeLa cells intrigued Skloot. Skloot first earned a biology degree, then a writing degree. She combined her two interests and the result is *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.* The book is more than a biography, though. Henrietta's life is rather obscure, especially since she's been dead for decades. While Part One focuses mostly on Henrietta's life and death, Skloot brings in additional information for the remainder of the book. Parts Two and Three examine the Lacks family today, medical researchers who first used HeLa cells, and ethics surrounding the relevant field of medical research.

Unlike Krakauer, Skloot appears in the book right away. The seven-page prologue is Skloot's story. Here, we see that Skloot first came across Henrietta's story in a community college biology class. In a lecture about cells, her professor briefly mentioned Henrietta and how her cells led to the development of medical treatments for leukemia, herpes, and influenza. Skloot quotes her professor as saying, "HeLa cells were one of the most important things that happened to medicine in the last hundred years."[60] With that, he ended the lecture. But Skloot knew a story when she heard one. She followed the professor in his office to ask questions about Henrietta, but he didn't know the answers. So began Skloot's years-long quest to find answers.

After the prologue, Skloot doesn't again appear as a character until Chapter 6, about fifteen percent of the way into the story. The first five chapters tell the story

[60] Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 4.

of Henrietta's life, and Skloot lets Henrietta's actions speak for themselves without adding commentary. In Chapter 6, titled "Lady's on the Phone," readers see Skloot going through the process of trying to track down the Lacks family. It was not an easy process: "I started calling Deborah [Henrietta's daughter], her brothers, and her father daily, but they didn't answer. Finally, after several days of leaving messages, someone answered at Day's [Henrietta's husband] house: a young boy who didn't say hello, just breathed into the receiver, hip-hop thumping in the background."[61] In the end Skloot talks to Day, but it doesn't end well. "'Well, so let my old lady cells talk to you and leave me alone,' he snapped. 'I had enough 'a you people.' Then he hung up."[62]

All of Skloot's thirty-eight chapters include headers that refer to the year in which the chapter takes place. Chapters that take place in 1951 are Henrietta's story, as that is the year she was diagnosed with cervical cancer and died. Chapters that are set throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s document the medical research that was conducted with HeLa cells and how the HeLa cell industry grew. Several chapters take place in 1999, 2000, and 2001, and these are the chapters in which Skloot appears as a character. These are the years in which she conducted her research into Henrietta's story. Apart from those chapters, she rarely appears as an "I."

As mentioned previously, in the eleven chapters of Part One, Skloot's presence is light. The focus is on Henrietta's life and death, told by an invisible narrator. The eleven chapters in Part Two follow the same light touch, with Skloot appearing infrequently. Instead, the focus is on the first years HeLa cells were used in research and how they quickly reproduced and supported research around the world.

Part Three, however, prominently features Skloot. Almost all of the sixteen chapters take place from 1999-2001. In this last section of the book, Skloot is helping the Lacks family find answers about their mother. She is helping them gain some closure over her death through accepting the fact that though Henrietta is dead, and though her cells were taken from her without consent, her cells are helping people throughout the world. In total, fifteen of the thirty-eight chapters take place in 1999-2001 with Skloot as a first-person narrator, about forty percent of the book.

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[61] Ibid., 54.
[62] Ibid., 55.

It was Skloot's editor who helped her realize that she needed to be part of the story.

> At first, I was barely present in any of the first-person parts of the book, because I was really holding back and not wanting to have it be about my emotions. It took a lot of revising to let myself have some reactions. Some of that was my editor. When she read the first version that I gave to her, she was like, 'OK, you seem like a psychopath in this scene, because Deborah just threw you against the wall, and she's screaming at you, and you don't react. You have to react.' My editor drew out a little of that emotional stuff that I was really hesitant to put in.[63]

Biographers who hold back essential information about themselves, like Johnson in *Life of Savage* and Freedman in *Who She Was*, leave me with a sense that something is missing. When the biographer actually IS part of the story, like Johnson and Freedman and Skloot, it can give the biography an added emotional punch. Without Skloot, in fact, there is no story. Skloot did not have an option to keep a distance from her subject, for she was the one who led the Lackses on the search for information about Henrietta. Without Skloot, it is doubtful the Lackses—many of whom did not even have high school educations—would have even known where to begin research on their mother.

The empathy Skloot had not only for Henrietta, but also for her descendants, is clear. Their stories are marked by tragedy and misfortune. Henrietta died at the age of 31 largely due to inadequate medical care. Her family did not reap any benefits from the use of her cells in medical research, and medical professionals continued to use the family for research, never taking the time to explain what they were doing, at least not in a way the family would understand: "When she [Deborah] asked McKusick to explain more about the cells, he gave her a book he'd edited called *Medical Genetics*, which would become one of the most important textbooks in the field. …The book was filled with complicated sentences explaining Henrietta's cells by saying, 'it's atypical histology may correlate with the unusually

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[63] Pitzer, Andrea. "Rebecca Skloot on Narrating History." Neiman Storyboard. 16 July 2010. Retrieved from http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2010/07/16/rebecca-skloot-immortal-life-of-henrietta-lacks-interview-narrative/

malignant behavior of the carcinoma,' and something about the 'correlate of the tumor's singularity.'"[64]

Skloot's tone is much like Krakauer's in that she is serving as an expert guide to the Lacks story. In her prologue, she tells readers that she has based the book on thousands of hours of interviews with the Lacks family and medical experts, archival photos, documents, research, and a journal kept by Deborah. Her tone is professional, yet empathetic.

Susan Griffin's "Our Secret"

In "Our Secret," Susan Griffin reveals her painful memories as she tells the larger story of Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS during World War II, as well as stories of war survivors. She also weaves in several metaphorical asides. She interjects information about cell nuclei, such as how the walls only let in helpful molecules while keeping harm at bay. She provides a short history of missile development: its beginnings in Germany during World War II and then its subsequent expansion by other superpowers. Lastly, Griffin describes several works by Käthe Kollwitz, the early 20th century German artist who dared to draw depictions of poverty and the effects of war upon the human condition.

Griffin uses personal details in a different way from Krakauer and Skloot. While Krakauer and Skloot only reveal personal information as it relates to their subjects, Griffin's revelations are intensely personal. She writes about alcoholism, racism, and sexuality within her own family. Griffin is present throughout the piece, referring to herself on almost every page of the seventy-page story.

"Our Secret" is an example, like *Into the Wild*, of an author serving as a mirror to the subject, a way to illuminate a subject who cannot be fully known because he is dead. Griffin's subject poses a challenge, though. She is not out to identify with a happy-go-lucky, somewhat naïve young man, as Krakauer did. Instead, she chooses to explore the darkness of human nature by writing about Himmler. Griffin plumbs her own family secrets and dysfunction in order to speculate on what may have prompted Himmler to commit such evil. She examines her own capacity to commit harm with brutal honesty:

> Writing this, I have tried to find my own rage. The memory is immediate. I am a child, almost nine years old. I sit on the

[64] Skloot, 188.

> cold pavement of a winter day in Los Angeles. My grandmother has angered me. There is a terrible injustice. A punishment that has enraged me. As I sit picking blades of grass and arranging them into piles, I am torturing her in my mind. I have tied her up and I am shouting at her. Threatening her. Striking her. I batter her, batter her as if with each blow, each landing of my hand against her flesh, I can force my way into her, I can be inside her, I can grab hold of someone inside her, someone who feels, who feels as I do, who feels the hurt I feel, the wound I feel, who feels pain as I feel pain.[65]

This darkness and rawness embody the tone of the entire piece. Yet, Griffin's presence throughout the piece is comforting. She knows she is leading readers into a dark place to confront difficult subjects and ideas, but she is there right along with the reader. This voice is in keeping with the subject matter: Griffin contemplates the dark human nature of her subject and also takes an honest look at her own dark side.

Griffin does not provide an author's note or a prologue that explains her authorial presence. She comes from a more literary tradition of writing that includes plays and poems. Krakauer and Skloot both have journalism experience,[66] and perhaps they felt the need to explain their presence in their books because objectivity is highly prized in traditional journalism. In addition, Griffin is not so much tracing Himmler's steps or providing chronological background information, much as one might find in a more traditional approach to biography. He is a well-known figure, unlike McCandless and Lacks. Books like Krakauer's and Skloot's feature more overt research, including interviews with sources and traveling to places where the subjects lived. The result is a more chronological narrative of their subjects. Griffin does not repeat the "nuts and bolts" background about Himmler found in many biographies of the man. Instead, she addresses a series of questions. What does he represent? What aspect of human nature does he embody? What may have contributed to his evil? She asks, "Is the direction of life inevitable? Or are there crossroads, points at which the direction can be changed?"[67] She uses fragments from her own life in an attempt to answer these questions.

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[65] Griffin, Susan. *A Chorus of Stones*: *The Private Life of War*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 147.

[66] Krakauer has written for publications including Smithsonian, TIME, Rolling Stone, and The New Yorker. Skloot has written for publications including the New York Times Magazine, O, The Oprah Magazine, Discover, and The Chicago Tribune.

[67] Griffin, 130.

The use of intensely personal details may trouble some readers. The subject matter of Nazism, alcoholism, and sexual abuse can be uncomfortable. Griffin's approach to writing about Himmler in this personal way is bold and risky, namely because her subject is not an easy one for readers to identify with or empathize with as compared to the other examples I provided. In contrast, McCandless was a young, perhaps naïve young man. Though he came from a privileged background and had the ability to wander the country without a job, his youth and earnestness still make him a sympathetic subject. Henrietta Lacks and her family are entirely sympathetic, victims of a classist and racist system.

An author who is writing a biography of someone who has committed atrocities requires the consideration of how to approach the subject. The choice of Himmler as a biographical subject may prompt people to ask, "Why would you want to write about someone like that?" But the fact is, we cannot ignore the dark side of history or only write about people with unblemished records (as if those people exist, anyway). Writing a biography of someone like Himmler, or any other difficult subject, requires a writer to see the world through their eyes, as frightening as that may be. As Mark Roseman writes in a journal article about biographical approaches to Nazi figures: "Does biography require gestures of empathy that in this context we cannot—or should not—make? Is a journey into the psychological interior of these men somehow inadmissible?"[68] Griffin dares to make that journey. Empathy requires someone to understand and feel what another person is experiencing. Why did Himmler make the choices he did? Why did he choose the path of evil and not turn away from it? Griffin dares to get close to Himmler, dares to get into his mind, which is a bold move, perhaps even admirable. The desire to probe Himmler's mind is critical to helping readers understand how evil decisions come about, to learn from them in hopes of not repeating history.

Biographers' perspectives on first-person narration

What do authors themselves have to say about using first-person narration in biography? Krakauer has said he prefers to write in third person. "But magazine editors [*Into the Wild* began as a magazine article in *Outside*] almost always push a writer to work in the first person. They'll say, 'We want the reader to see what you

[68] Roseman, Mark. "The Lives of Others—Amid the Deaths of Others: Biographical Approaches to Nazi Perpetrators." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 15, no. 4, Dec. 2013, 444.

see, to smell what you smell, to feel exactly what you feel as you're out there getting the story.'"[69] Krakauer explains why he felt first-person narration was necessary for *Into the Wild*: "I felt like I *knew* McCandless, and knew what he was trying to accomplish, so I used my own experience to argue, in a roundabout way, that he wasn't a nutcase. I was telling the reader, 'You know, I was just as reckless and stupid as he was in my youth, and I wasn't suicidal. So perhaps *he* wasn't suicidal, either.'"[70]

Before *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was published, Skloot was primarily a science writer. Most of her writing could be categorized as traditional journalism, which has an invisible but learned narrator. So when she started writing *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Skloot initially envisioned a more traditional journalistic narrative. "I spent so much time fighting against being in the book, thinking, 'It's not my story, it's their story. It's not about me.' And I was right, it's not."[71]

But part of Skloot's narrative touches on medical professionals and other journalists who have tracked down the Lacks family over time. Many of them treated the Lackses with little respect. As a result, the family was wary of Skloot's involvement when they first met her. They thought she was like everyone else who wanted to profit from Henrietta's story and legacy.

"So many other journalists, doctors and various other people came before me in similar circumstances, wanting something from the family related to the cells. I realized I couldn't leave that out. Then there would be this obvious question: 'Well, what about you?'"[72]

Skloot saw herself as a vehicle so readers could better know Deborah, Henrietta's daughter. Skloot is a filter through which we can see Deborah's responses to various pieces of information. "That was very much one of the reasons I was in the book—to show the way she responded to me and the impact I had on her, with us traveling together, her going into laboratories to see her mother's cells for

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[69] Boynton, Robert S. *The New New Journalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 179.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Pitzer.
[72] Ibid.

the first time and learning some really hard information that had some essentially life-threatening effects on her."[73]

In general, critics have praised the first-person narration in these works of Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin. In *The New York Times* review, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt says this of *Into the Wild*: "But certainly among the most moving chapters in the book are the two in which the author discloses why he identified with his subject so strongly."[74] Dwight Garner of *The New York Times* calls Skloot "a memorable character" who "never intrudes on the narrative, but she takes us along with her in her reporting, as she moves around the country in her battered, muffler-free black Honda.[75] Of Susan Griffin's *A Chorus of Stones*, in which "Our Secret" appears, *Publishers Weekly* writes: "Mixing history, myth and memoir, this kaleidoscopic work contains passages of striking power along with dazzling character sketches…"[76]

This analysis of how three different biographers use personal details, empathy, and tone has enabled me to give similar considerations to my own work, *The Unlikely Terrorist*, as we will now see.

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher. "Taking Risk to Its 'Logical' Extreme." *The New York Times.* 4 January 1996. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/krakauer-wild.html

[75] Garner, Dwight. "A Woman's Undying Gift to Science." *New York Times*. 2 February, 2010. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/03/books/03book.html?pagewanted=all.

[76] *Publishers Weekly*. "A Chorus of Stones." 31 August 1992. Retrieved from http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-385-41857-7

CHAPTER 3: INCORPORATING RESEARCH INTO MY WORK

The works of Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin cach provided in some way a model for me to emulate as I wrote *The Unlikely Terrorist*. They helped me find my own professional tone/voice, one that acts as a guide to the reader. They aided me in making decisions about what personal details to reveal about myself and where to come into the story. In addition, they helped me to clarify my views about narrator empathy and distance.

Establishing a guiding tone/voice

My knowledge of Camilla Hall is privileged, and I hope it has equipped me to write the best biography I can. As far as I know, nobody else has had access to the documents related to her life and the people who knew her. I spent years studying 1960s/1970s-era United States as a master's degree student in history, which gave me a strong knowledge of protest movements and radical, anti-government organizations. While general information about Camilla exists in books and newspaper articles about the Symbionese Liberation Army written shortly after the SLA's demise in 1975, I have had access to documents about and letters from Camilla that have not been made public, and I also interviewed her friends and distant relatives.

I spent fifteen years researching Camilla's life and during this time I developed a connection to Camilla, much as other biographers have developed relationships with their subjects. I was able to see her from more angles than most people or the media. I saw her not only as a member of a radical organization, but also as a devoted daughter, talented artist and musician, and loving friend. I wanted readers to know that I have brought my perspective and opinions on Camilla's life into her story. For example, I included an introduction that establishes who I am and how long I have been researching Camilla's life. This is similar to what both Krakauer and Skloot do in their author's note and prologue, respectively. In my introduction, readers learn when I first came across Camilla's story:

"When I first saw Camilla's photo, she again was overshadowed. She was a small footnote to the bigger story in the June 17, 1999, Minneapolis *StarTribune* …" And: "I started my search into Camilla's story the same day I saw her picture for the first time." In the last paragraph of my introduction, readers get a sense that I have

been researching the story for many years: "Her conversion to violent, radical domestic terrorism didn't make any sense when I first visited with Mike Haueser at Gustavus; fifteen years later it still doesn't make any sense. In fact, the more I learn about Camilla, the more confused I become."

In their books, Krakauer and Skloot take time to establish biographical authority and a unique understanding of their subjects. Krakauer tells readers that he is an experienced outdoor adventurer and mountain climber. He reveals this information because his subject, Chris McCandless, spent many months alone exploring the rugged terrain of western North America by hiking, canoeing, and living in tents. In Skloot's prologue, she weaves in information about her biology degree and writing credentials. Hermione Lee advocates for the necessity of having some knowledge that puts a subject into context: "It would be hard, if not impossible, to write the life of a mountaineer or a gardener, a chemist or an architect, with no experience—or at least not understanding at all—of those professions."[77] I am not a radical, protesting the U.S. government at every turn. However, I have done my best to learn about the time period in which Camilla lived, in addition to spending years committed to learning about her family, her jobs, the places she lived, the people she loved—in short, learning about her life.

Selection of personal details

First-person narration in biography allows the author to use his or her life to offer reflection upon the subject's life. Krakauer and Griffin do this particularly well. Krakauer uses his own experiences as a youthful, risk-taking adventurer to hold a mirror up to McCandless's actions. Griffin writes about violence and sexism in her own family to help readers better understand the context in which Himmler was raised. What I find useful about these examples is their use of both commonalities and differences to shed light upon a subject. Krakauer and McCandless are similar in many ways. They both were young, single men who left their families to "find themselves" in the wilderness and they both had overbearing fathers who had high expectations for their sons.

But Griffin and her subject are quite different. Griffin actually uses these differences to her advantage in making a larger story. She puts these differences

[77] Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, 12.

side-by-side to see if a larger picture emerges, just as a mosaic artist uses different sizes and colors of glass to blend together a complete picture. Griffin's piece helped me see that I should not be afraid to explore differences between my subject and myself. In fact, it may be these differences that can help shed light on Camilla's actions. I admit that I started *The Unlikely Terrorist* with a nagging concern that my life set next to Camilla's life may not make sense to the reader. While Camilla and I shared some commonalities—we grew up in rural southern Minnesota, we come from backgrounds of faith, and we encountered grief and loss at early ages—in other ways we were opposite. Camilla was opinionated about politics and involved herself in the struggles of the poor and underserved, going on mission trips with her parents and working for county social service agencies. She felt intense outrage at government actions, such as the war in Vietnam, and her outrage became stronger when she moved to Berkeley in 1971. She surrounded herself with people who had similar views and she became more and more radicalized. In her personal life, she harbored a secret from her parents: she was a lesbian, and she struggled to find meaningful romantic relationships.

I, on the other hand, consider myself apolitical. I have some acquaintances with strong political opinions, but I avoid their conversations and do not join in to agree or argue. At no time have I been tempted to embrace radical politics. My extent of helping the underserved or poor is limited mostly to making charitable contributions. In my personal life, I am heterosexual and married young; I feel fortunate to not have endured prejudice based on sexual orientation. I surround myself with friends and family; I have always lived within thirty miles of where I grew up. I cannot identify with Camilla's wanderlust and its accompanying loneliness. But I used these differences to ask hard questions of myself in an attempt to understand Camilla. In my introduction to *The Unlikely Terrorist*, I write this: "My good works don't go beyond volunteering or making charitable contributions, and I suspect that's where good actions end for most people. I can give bits of my time or money without causing major disruptions to my life. I like to picture myself more generous than I really am, but would I sacrifice my own comfort? How much am I truly willing to give up?"

By casting this critical eye upon myself, I want readers to put themselves in a frame of mind to understand Camilla's decisions. My goal is to help readers see that her actions were born out of the good that she wanted to do; the same good that

many of us hope to accomplish with our lives. By talking about my own experiences, I am asking readers to envision a middle ground for effective change. I see myself as someone who doesn't do enough, while Camilla's social activism led her to cross the line into violence and she lost her life as a result.

Knowing that biographers can be very different from their subjects yet still reveal personal details helped to ease my earlier concerns. For example, Skloot addresses the differences between her and the Lacks family in her prologue: "Deborah and I came from very different cultures: I grew up white and agnostic in the Pacific Northwest, my roots half New York Jew and half Midwestern Protestant; Deborah was a deeply religious black Christian from the South."[78] She goes on to note other differences: their views toward science, religion, and the neighborhoods they called home. My differences from Camilla echo what Skloot states in her prologue. I am a child of the 1980s writing about a child of the 1950s/1960s. My notion of supporting social justice is to write a check, while social justice was a critical component of Camilla's soul. I am a politically neutral woman writing about a feminist with strong opinions. Despite the differences, Skloot's relationship with the Lacks family grows throughout the course of the book. I also want to show readers how my relationship with Camilla evolved during the course of writing, and how Camilla caused me to think differently about activism.

Where the author comes into the story

If an author is a narrator in a biography, at what point does he or she introduce the "I"? With the works by Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin, it is noteworthy that the author makes an appearance before the subject. A survey of similar biographies reveals that an early introduction of the author as a character is often the case.[79] One purpose I have identified for this early self-introduction is to explain how the author came across the subject and became interested in pursuing the story. Krakauer notes that he was given the McCandless story as an assignment for *Outside* magazine, but his fascination with McCandless continued after publication and that is why he decided to expand the story into a book. Skloot discusses the community

[78] Skloot, 7.

[79] Other examples include: *Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left* (2003) by Susan Braudy; *Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town* (2010) by Elyssa East; *Visiting Tom* (2012) by Michael Perry; and *Remembering Denny* (1993) by Calvin Trillin.

college biology class in which she first heard about Henrietta Lacks. These explanations establish the author's curiosity. If an author is so curious about a subject that he/she is compelled to find more information and write a biography, I as a reader want to learn more. I will keep turning the pages of the biography because I enjoy being on that journey of discovery with the biographer.

I used this model of early self-introduction in *The Unlikely Terrorist*. I begin the book with these words:

> The first time I saw Camilla Hall's photo, I stared at it for a good long time. I'd never met Camilla, never even heard of her until the day I saw the picture in the newspaper. I've been known to stare at photos of models and actresses, trying to divine what makes them so beautiful. But Camilla's not beautiful in the classical sense. I would later read media reports in which she was described as "homely," which were unfair and cruel and far from the truth. In the newspaper picture, Camilla is a smiling, bespectacled blonde, her fine hair parted in the middle and falling into a neat bob at her shoulders. The date of the picture is unknown, but Camilla appears to be in her mid-20s. She wouldn't live to thirty.

Through this first paragraph, I am establishing my interest in and curiosity about my subject. I am setting up Camilla as the underdog, a person who had endured cruelty and injustice. I end the paragraph on a note of mystery—why did she not live past the age of thirty? I also hope this paragraph starts to cultivate empathy for Camilla. In this paragraph, I wanted to make a case for why readers should be interested in my subject even though they may have never heard of Camilla, just as Krakauer, Skloot, and others are making a case for why readers should be interested in their subjects.

I make this appearance in the text right away, but then in the first part of *The Unlikely Terrorist* I keep the focus on Camilla. This models the approach that Krakauer and Skloot have taken. The reason I made this decision is because I wanted readers to have a solid understanding of who Camilla was and the facts of her life before I proceed into Part Two. In Part Two of *The Unlikely Terrorist*, my presence as a first-person narrator is much more consistent. There, I charted a psychological timeline for Camilla and how her thought process evolved throughout her life. In Part One, readers learn the facts of her life that have been documented. But in Part Two, I tried to determine Camilla's mindset in an effort to answer the question,

"Why did she join the SLA?" I used sources such as letters Camilla wrote to her parents, her artwork, her poems, and what her friends said about her to pose possible answers to the question. I also tried to discover answers to a bigger question: What does Camilla's life and death mean to us today? Here I wanted to draw connections between Camilla's choices and choices people are making today to join radical groups. Presently, throughout the United States and Europe, young men and women are deciding to leave friends, family, and jobs behind and join the fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Can a connection be made? Can Camilla's life teach us something about decisions people make today to join violent organizations?

Besides deciding where to come into the story, the process of writing about oneself demands constant choices about what information to include and what to leave out. Out of the three authors I have studied in-depth, Krakauer reveals the least amount of personal information. He includes only facts about his life that parallel McCandless's experiences, such as information about mountain climbing, hiking, and living with an overbearing father. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Griffin reveals a vast amount of painful detail about herself. Skloot's version of herself falls somewhere in the middle of Krakauer's and Griffin's approaches. Even in Part Three of the book, where Skloot appears consistently, she does not reveal much background information on herself.

There is no wrong approach when it comes to deciding how much detail the author should reveal about himself or herself in a biography; it's a highly personal decision. The amount of authorial detail that is included in a biography can effectively serve the larger story. While Griffin is revelatory and brutally honest about herself, it relates to her exploration of violence, family, and nature versus nurture. On the other hand, readers only get information about Krakauer and Skloot if it relates to their subjects. For example, readers do not learn about the authors' family histories (with the exception of Krakauer's father) or their current family situations (whether they are married, have children, etc.).

In *The Unlikely Terrorist*, readers learn about my work and educational background, as those are experiences that led me to research Camilla's life. And because Camilla and I share some common traits, such as growing up in rural Minnesota and a familiarity with death from a young age, I have included some

information about myself in the hope that it can shed light on how Camilla's worldview may have been formed.

In Chapter 4 of my creative manuscript, though both Camilla and I were raised in southern Minnesota towns, I make an argument that because she was raised in a college town, and I in a blue-collar town, we were exposed to different thoughts and ideas. I write: "No overt conversations about change and improvement took place in Waseca. Politics and education dominated St. Peter, while in Waseca it was farming and religion. In a place like that, ideas are a luxury. Ideas for change flow when basic needs are met. In Waseca most people were still working on fulfilling their basic needs, my family included."

In Chapter 18, I write about the culture of silence that surrounds grief in which both Camilla and I grew up:

> After my dad died when I was 15 years old, no one inquired into my thoughts and feelings. My family, like the Halls, wasn't the type to ask probing questions. As long as you appeared well adjusted on the surface, others assumed you were fine. After Dad died, I did well in school, had a lot of friends, and participated in activities like plays and marching band. And I truly felt happy, but only as long as I shut down the deep sadness inside. My family never talked about Dad. We didn't talk about his life, we didn't reminisce over good memories, we didn't bask in the love he left behind. We didn't talk about his death and what a massive hole it left in all of us.

Empathy and distance

One of my goals in writing *The Unlikely Terrorist* was to offer a new perspective on Camilla's life, a perspective that had been missing from the historical record. I felt called to uncover Camilla's humanity. If one reads newspaper articles published shortly after Camilla's death, the same words are used to describe her over and over, so much so that those words become the only description the public gets of her. Some phrases used to describe Camilla include "gun-toting terrorist"[80] and "Candy Hall—A sweet girl turned bitter."[81] But those descriptions have been cemented into the historical record. Even in 2016, in a book by Jeffrey Toobin titled *American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty*

[80] "The Sixth Dead Terrorist." *Oakland Tribune*. 20 May 1974.

[81] Koon, Bruce. "Candy Hall—A Sweet Girl Turned Bitter." *San Francisco Examiner* 18 May 1974. ("Candy" was a nickname Camilla used through high school).

Hearst, he repeats the overused and tired clichés from those early news reports to offer only a one-dimensional portrait of Camilla. She is doomed to forever be an overweight, lovelorn lesbian who only committed to the SLA as a way to get close to the lover, Patricia Soltysik, who had abandoned her. "They were an odd couple—the brooding Soltysik, was was small and wiry, and the airy Hall, who was zaftig and ungainly," writes Toobin.[82]

When Camilla is reduced to a cliché, she becomes a flat character who was involved in the SLA and nothing else, almost as if she hadn't existed before the SLA emerged in 1973. In my creative work, I tried to view Camilla's life with a fresh perspective and new commentary. First-person narration was the best way for me to express my empathy toward Camilla.

The journalists covering the SLA in 1974 did not take the time to get to know Camilla's complexities. Instead, they employed narrative distance, which is an obstacle in trying to understand her and her actions. This distance placed Camilla in a narrow category and stereotyped her as an unhinged radical. I developed a connection to Camilla, and as such I wanted to explore all facets of her life and personality. By doing so, I can portray her as a complex human being, a perspective that has been missing in mainstream media reports.

I attempted to put myself in Camilla's world as much as possible to gain empathy. Unfortunately, the people who knew her the best—her immediate family members—were all dead by the time I started my research. But I could travel to the places that Camilla called home. I have been to the house in which she was raised in St. Peter, Minnesota, as well as to her residences in the Bay Area in California. I could not talk to Camilla, but I found the next best thing. In Chapter 23 of *The Unlikely Terrorist*, I write about visiting Sara Jane Olson in a California prison. Olson became a member of the SLA after Camilla's death. After hiding from law enforcement officials for nearly 25 years, Olson was taken into custody in 1999 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a few years later was sentenced to several years in prison.

In that chapter I write: "The woman I seek is dead. So I decide to find a proxy. The proxy is another Minnesota girl, also the daughter of a teacher who found her way to Berkeley in the heady 1970s. When I visit her in 2008, she's still in

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[82] Toobin, Jeffrey. *American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst*. (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 82.

California, though now her home there is a heavily fortified women's prison in California's dusty Central Valley."

I imagine that Camilla might have had a life like Olson's, had she lived. In the chapter, I explain my journey and why I think it will help me answer questions about Camilla's motives in joining the SLA. Through research such as this, as well as information gleaned from documents and interviews, I have been able to convey more information about Camilla's life than has previously existed. Camilla's life becomes more of a story when I use techniques such as creating scenes from different moments in her life—for example, when her younger sister died; her involvement in the Patricia Hearst kidnapping; or how she lived in tiny apartments for several months with the other eight members of the SLA. Krakauer, Skloot, and Griffin all create scenes in which they imagine their subjects in action. Gail Porter Mandell writes about the way biographers attempt to breathe life into their subjects: "No less than the historian, they desire to ascertain the facts of the lives of their subject, but like the novelist, they also aim to create through language the illusion of life."[83]

Pondering big questions

Another method that allowed me to uncover Camilla's humanity was to ponder what I call "big questions." How did a fun-loving, friendly, kind pastor's daughter from Minnesota get caught up in one of the most notorious radical groups the United States produced in the 1970s? How well can we really know someone? These questions relate to universal themes of choice, decisions, risks, and secrets. They also relate to issues affecting the world today, in which people of all ages, genders, and nationalities are caught up in radical movements.

This exploration is peppered throughout my book, though much of it is concentrated in Part Two. To me, it did not make sense to start the book with explorations of the questions because readers would not have the facts of Camilla's life necessary to put the questions into context. It made more sense to start with a biography of Camilla's life, then move into explorations of who Camilla was and why she might have made the decisions she did.

[83] Mandell, 3.

In the introduction to *The Unlikely Terrorist*, I included the question I was trying to answer throughout the book: "In September 1973, Camilla was leading the fight for unionizing female workers in the East Bay parks district. Her picture was in the newspapers at the time; she beamed, surrounded by the workers. She was clearly in her element. She could have stopped there and been a success. … But four months later, she had bought a gun and had the grip customized for her small hand. She was the last SLA member to go underground, a few days after the Hearst kidnapping. What changed in those few short months?"

In other parts of my book, I used this type of contemplation to stop, pause, and reflect. These passages allow the reader to see my thought process and the journey I take to arrive at answers. Here is an example from the end of the book, Chapter 24, where I ruminate about cults and groupthink. I write about my fascination with cults and my early reading of *Helter Skelter*, the book about Charles Manson and the Manson family.[84]

> They seemed so much like me, ordinary girls, before they met Manson. They went to school, had families, ate lunch, played with friends. Maybe that's why I kept reading. If they were like me, did that mean I could be like them? What was saving me from getting wrapped up in a cult? From falling under the influence of a crazy personality? Likely the Manson family didn't seem so dangerous upon first glance. They weren't murderers from the beginning; that developed over time. They were hippies living in their communal way. When their actions became more and more outlandish, could the girls involved even see the progression? Or were they too close to it? By the time the family crossed over into crime, were the girls too far in to escape?
>
> How far would I be willing to go with someone with whom I was in love? Am I just lucky that my lovers weren't revolutionaries? Because if they had been, would I, too, have gone with them? We have the benefit of hindsight. We know what the Manson family did. That makes it easy for us to say it would have never been us. But go back in time, before any crimes were committed, and is there a possibility you would have been there, too?

People with little knowledge of Camilla might try to find simple answers to the question of why she did what she did: *She was crazy. She was a radical. She was blindly lured into the SLA by her former lover*. But there are no simple answers, just

[84] Bugliosi, Vincent. *Helter Skelter*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).

as there are no simple answers to why Chris McCandless made the decisions he did, why the Lacks family was never informed about what happened to Henrietta's cells, why Himmler chose the path of evil. Of the three authors that I studied, Griffin is most overt in her use of questions, stating them outright in "Our Secret": "Who are we?"[85] "Why do some inflict on others the suffering they have endured? What is it in a life that makes one choose to do this, or not?"[86]

The close analysis of the Krakauer and Skloot books, as well as Griffin's "Our Secret," has been influential upon my writing of *The Unlikely Terrorist* and has assisted me in situating my writing in the canon of first-person narration in biography. In the concluding chapter of this critical study, I will address lasting implications of this research in more detail.

[85] Griffin, 151.
[86] Griffin, 168.

CHAPTER 4:
CONCLUSION

This study focused on the central question: In what ways might I, as a contemporary biographer, insert myself into the stories of the people I am writing about? To answer this question, I examined first-person narration in biography, specifically looking at biographers who did not have a personal relationship with their subjects. A brief look into the historical context of this biographical voice showed some variations over the centuries regarding tone, the use of empathy, and the selection of personal details the narrator chooses to reveal. A closer examination of three contemporary American biographies—*Into the Wild, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and "Our Secret"—further revealed the nuances and decisions biographers made when including themselves in the story. These decisions include choices about tone and voice, where and how often the authors place themselves in the story, and the blend of empathy and distance they employ. I then explained how I applied this analysis to my creative work, *The Unlikely Terrorist: Camilla Hall and the Symbionese Liberation Army*.

This study has influenced my own decisions about my role as a narrator in Camilla's story. For example, I observed how some biographers using first-person narration include themselves in the story right away—if not on page one, then somewhere in the introduction or first chapter. Rebecca Skloot in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* begins her biography by ruminating on a photograph of Henrietta. I have chosen to start my biography in the same way, recounting the day in which I first saw Camilla's photograph in a newspaper. Skloot, Krakauer, Griffin, and others weave themselves into their creative works at important junctures to offer critical observations, commentary, and personal details that illuminate their subjects' lives. For example, Krakauer appears as a character in *Into the Wild* to explain his experiences as an adventurer to remote places, in an attempt to help readers better understand what may have driven his subject, Chris McCandless, to undertake similar explorations. This helped me form the chapter in my biography in which I explain how my small-town Minnesota upbringing influenced me, in an attempt to shed light upon how Camilla's small-town Minnesota upbringing may have influenced her. Griffin's authorial voice in pondering what I call "big questions" in

"Our Secret" inspired me to conduct similar rumination upon Camilla's life, which I include toward the end of my creative manuscript.

I discovered that writing in a first-person point of view in biography is not without its challenges and drawbacks. In an interview with Gail Porter Mandell, the biographer Arnold Rampersad talked about the importance of narrative distance when he was writing about the American poet Langston Hughes. "…I found that it was very important to keep a distance from him—not allow him to penetrate my own spirit, not to believe that I had some special relationship to him, that we were kindred minds or kindred spirits, or anything like that."[87]

I understand how the idea that an author is a "kindred spirit" with a subject can influence the writing process. In my case, do I want to argue that I share a kinship with Camilla, a woman who committed terrorist acts? On some levels I identify with her, but I did not want to become so attached to her that I was blinded to her flaws. I wanted to approach Camilla with empathy, especially when writing about the early years of her life that were marked by the deaths of her brothers and sister. But when writing about her later years, I wanted to reflect the gravity of her choices, which made me less empathetic. I worked hard to see both her humanity and her flaws, and there was room for both in my first-person approach to biography.

Another difficulty with the first-person approach is that it could draw criticism from readers who do not think Camilla deserves any empathy. This sometimes happens when authors write about flawed subjects. Some readers criticized Jon Krakauer for appearing empathetic toward McCandless in *Into the Wild*. Many people, especially Alaskans, view McCandless as spoiled and naïve, a rich kid who had no business hiking into the wilderness. One particularly harsh critic is *Alaska News Dispatch* columnist Craig Medred, who calls McCandless a "suicidal narcissist," a "bum, thief, and poacher."[88] Lise Weil, reviewing Griffin's *A Chorus of Stones* in *The Women's Review of Books*, criticizes Griffin for writing about someone like Heinrich Himmler without judgment. "How can Susan Griffin fail to hold these men accountable? Where is her outrage at the horrendous acts she is documenting?" Weil asks.[89] Camilla was a loving daughter, a devoted friend, and committed to helping those who needed assistance, such as young, unwed mothers.

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[87] Mandell, 61-62.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 13.

But once she joined the SLA, her acts included kidnapping, bank robbery, and shooting at police officers. Weil's criticism of Griffin caused me to write *The Unlikely Terrorist* in a way that not only documents Camilla's journey but also holds her accountable for her actions.

When I started my research, I discovered there were few sources that I could locate that explicitly and thoroughly addressed first-person narration in biography. When I did locate sources, they were often about biographers who inserted themselves into the story because they had a relationship with their subjects. However, my creative work is a biography of a woman I did not know, and it was even more difficult for me to find research material on first-person narration in biography in which the author did not know the subject. During my research, I located and read academic journal articles that addressed the role of narrator and empathy in biography, postmodern approaches to biography, how biographers addressed myths that surround their subjects, and the narrator-subject relationship. The articles provided context and specific perspectives, but I found that my reading and analysis of first-person narrated biographies themselves to be the most influential upon my own work. The works of Aubrey, Johnson, and Lee, as well as reading interviews with contemporary biographers like Lee and Richard Holmes, provided me stellar examples to follow and imparted upon me thought-provoking perspectives regarding how biographers approach their work and how and why they choose to insert themselves into the stories of their subjects. The three contemporary writers I closely analyzed extended my comprehension of the first-person voice in biography and, as I addressed above, heavily influenced the approach I took in *The Unlikely Terrorist*.

My contribution to this field of study as a researcher has been to bring varied resources together in one place and provide an analysis of first-person narration in biography. It is my hope that readers and critics of biography will use this research to engage with and analyze biographical texts, and that writers of biography can use this research to inform their decisions regarding their own creative works. My creative work has made a contribution to American history in that in the biography, I have brought into light a completely unstudied figure in Camilla Hall. This contributes to new knowledge about this particularly fraught and divisive era in U.S. history at a time when political tensions are mounting once again.

The field of first-person narration in biography holds rich possibilities for scholars, researchers, and writers. There is more to add to the research I have started here. For example, the notions of narrator empathy and distance in biography intrigued me, and I would like to further explore that topic. I would like to extend my own research into a full-length critical study. I also would like to develop a guide for other writers, such as the undergraduate writing students I teach at university, who are interested in using first-person narration in biography. New biographies that use this approach, such as the recently released *The Fact of a Body: A Murder and a Memoir*,[90] will offer opportunities to extend the research.

I plan to continue using this approach to biography in my next writing project, which is an investigation into the disappearance in Africa of a man from my hometown. In essence, this research has provided me with a broad understanding of the role of the narrator in first-person biography, and it has allowed me to begin new projects with confidence in my own role as a narrator in biography.

[90] Marzano-Lesnevich, Alexandria. *The Fact of a Body: A Murder and a Memoir*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017.

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