In response to the Bailey–Roth controversy: New York Times columnist condemns biography's "Man Problem"

David Walsh
5 May 2021

On May 1, the *New York Times* carried an article by critic and biographer Ruth Franklin headlined "What We Lose When Only Men Write About Men" (in the print edition, "Literary Biography's Man Problem").

The article was provoked by the recent controversy surrounding the decision by publisher W.W. Norton, in response to unsubstantiated allegations of sexual misconduct, to remove Blake Bailey's biography of novelist Philip Roth from print, essentially to "pulp" the book.

Far from protesting this egregious act of censorship, Franklin clearly solidarizes herself with it. She gives new and intensely vivid meaning to the phrase "to kick someone while he or she is down." Moreover, appallingly, the *Times* editors have cynically provided Franklin the opportunity to revenge herself on Bailey, who wrote in 2016 a somewhat critical review in the *Wall Street Journal* of her biography of American writer Shirley Jackson (*Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*). Bailey, as we will discuss below, took the job seriously.

The *Times's* action is staggeringly unethical. The editors have assigned Franklin to write a lengthy opinion piece about an individual who once raised issues about her work. She is not a disinterested party; she has no moral or intellectual right to be commenting on Bailey's situation.

However, this is the underhanded, duplicitous manner in which the *Times* functions. One of the factors no doubt motivating Norton's precipitous action was the implied threat that if the publisher did not fall into line with the destruction of Bailey, the newspaper would take it out on the firm's authors and books. In other words, "Cross us, and you will pay a price." Norton got the message.

Franklin, a former editor at the *New Republic*, comes out with a number of extraordinary statements in her column. She writes, for example: "There has been no investigation as yet into the allegations against Mr. Bailey. But if they prove to be true, they give readers reason to doubt Mr. Bailey's ability to objectively evaluate materials relating to the women in Mr. Roth's life." This is an admission, to begin with, that Bailey's book has been "disappeared" and its author turned into a "non-person" prior to *any investigation* of the facts, before anyone could determine if there were *anything at all* to the claims. Franklin is not perturbed by this in the least. Again, this is business as usual in #MeToo America.

And what does "if they prove true" actually mean? There is almost nothing to investigate. The unfortunate Bailey has been brought down by a series of scurrilous rumors and allegations, generated, as the *Times* has previously half-admitted, by the resentment of his accusers over the success of his Roth biography and its failure to be sufficiently "tough" on its subject's supposed "misogyny."

Franklin's column also sheds light on one of the factors behind the attack on Bailey—the contentious issue as to who will have access to Roth's papers, and those of other literary figures. "The question," she writes, "of access—to materials, to family members and sometimes to the subject—has major repercussions for the work of scholars. Authorized biographers tend to be fiercely protective of their privileged status, which is often the basis for a book contract." Considerable sums of money are involved here.

Franklin is bitter that Roth gave Bailey exclusive access to his papers. She complains that "Mr. Bailey had in his possession 'hundreds of manila folders stuffed with archival material,'" according to a journalist.

She then goes on to argue: "Biographers aren't stenographers; we're more akin to novelists, constructing a narrative of a person's life and making editorial choices at every turn." Is that the case, that a biography is fictional like a novel? Didn't Roth have the right to expect, in selecting his biographer, that the writer would produce a scholarly work, extracting the truth about his life, not "constructing" it…according to which preconception?

Of course, the work of the literary biographer is not a transparent sheet through which the facts of his or her subject stream with no distortion whatsoever. However, the important biographer more than makes up for any inevitable limitation by the insights derived from study and experience he or she brings. The primary goal remains fidelity to the reality of another life. Richard Ellmann, renowned for exhaustively researched studies of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, argued that the biography "cannot be so mobile" as the novel or the poem, "because it is associated with history," with objective patterns and facts.

Ellmann acknowledged the impossibility of knowing "completely the intricacies with which any mind negotiates its surroundings to produce literature. The controlled seething out of which great works come is not likely to yield all its secrets." Yet, he went on, at moments and "in glimpses, biographers seem to come close to it, and the effort to come close, to make out of apparently haphazard circumstances a plotted circle, to know another person who has lived as well as we know a character in fiction, and better than we know ourselves, is not frivolous. It may even be, for reader as for writer, an essential part of the experience."

The worst passage in Franklin's May 1 *Times* article comes later: "Just as female critics have noticed instances of misogyny in Mr. Bailey's writing, a female biographer would likely have a more critical perspective on Mr. Roth's relationships with women. A Black biographer or, for that matter, a Jewish one could have more to say about race in Mr. Roth's fiction."

The implications of Franklin's argument are sinister. Whether she has thought it through or not hardly matters. This is an appeal for the "Balkanization" or "ethno-gender communalization" of literary criticism. Each major figure will need to pack his or her own sizable set of commentators: a Race biographer, a Gender biographer, a Sexual Orientation biographer, a National/Geographical biographer—and why not

© World Socialist Web Site

distinct critics who study the subject's relation with or to Children, Nature, Animals, Food, Clothing and more?

In any case, turned around, this race-gender-ethnic argument can be used to encourage truly Nazi-like conclusions. How can a Jew possibly write with any degree of depth about Shakespeare, or Wagner? Of course, can any male write valuably about a female? Farewell *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* and *Effi Briest*, among many others.

The unstated assumption of Franklin's piece—and it is an assumption shared by a significant portion of academia and media—is that one of the most profound means (if not *the* most profound means) of knowing an artist, or of defining an artist's relationship to the world, lies through gender, along with race. She advocates "improving representation," meaning more women writing and more women written about, as though the addition of women *in general* or the treatment of women's *universal* experiences as such would help matters. Why should that be the case? How would the inclusion, for example, of more critics with Franklin's narrow, petty bourgeois standpoint advance the cultural situation?

Gender is hardly an incidental or unimportant matter. The serious obstacles confronting Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot in the 19th century, and even Shirley Jackson in the middle of the 20th, were very real. In so far as social pressures and maltreatment helped nourish the hostility of these writers toward oppression of every kind, they resulted in work that corresponded more closely to the general human situation, the need for liberation from the existing social and moral order.

But none of the great women writers of the past began from the position of self-pity and entitlement adopted by Franklin and the present-day association of affluent female professionals striving for more wealth and privileges. They kept their eyes on critical matters.

Along these lines, Franklin, in her informative but uninspired biography of Shirley Jackson (famed for her 1948 short story "The Lottery," along with novels such as *The Road Through the Wall*, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*), placed too much emphasis on Jackson's unhappiness and frustration with her role of housewife and the failings of her husband, critic-academic Stanley Hyman.

In his *Wall Street Journal* review of Franklin's book, Blake Bailey took issue with the author's characterization of Jackson "as a kind of feminist prophet who anticipated the findings of Betty Friedan—I lost count of how many times that name was invoked—by two decades [in fact, more than 10 times]." Franklin, as Bailey noted, asserted in her introduction that Jackson's body of work "constitutes nothing less than the secret history of American women of her era."

Bailey added that "the story of a pioneering feminist needs a male heavy, and in this book the role falls hard on Stanley Hyman," although Franklin had earlier indicated her husband's role of "encouraging" his wife 'to write more and to write better.'"

Bailey further pointed out that Jackson's writings indicated that a "housewife's life," and specifically her life with Hyman and their four children in Vermont, was "a mixed blessing, to be sure, but a blessing nonetheless, at least for Jackson."

Franklin now rewards Bailey in the *Times* for the sin of pointing out her ideological biases by observing that his review "was perceived by many, including myself, as sexist"—and therefore Bailey, presumably, is potentially guilty of rape!

The worst approach to biography is the one that begins with moralizing preconceptions. The task in every instance, even in a study of one of history's genuinely monstrous figures, is to place the man or woman—with the necessary complexity!—in his or her era, as the product of objective processes, to mine the psychological and social reality from the hard rock of actual history, to explain how the given individual arrived at his or her social or intellectual destination.

In the case of an artist too, such as Philip Roth, there may be elements that people may not find pleasant, including perhaps his attitude toward women. He set out quite deliberately at times, for reasons that have personal and social roots, in his own phrase, to "let the repellent in." But here again, the biographer's task is to let the facts and documents speak for themselves, enabling the reader to render his or her own judgment.

Franklin proceeds differently. Her book contains few revelations in relation to Shirley Jackson's artistic development, because the author set out with the notions that (a) the writer was a victim like every other American woman of her time of sexist limitations and stereotypes and (b) Jackson's husband must have been to blame, in one fashion or another, for imposing those conditions on her—that he is, in the end, the villain of the piece.

Franklin proceeds backward from this vision to find confirmation for it, despite, as Bailey correctly notes, various contradictory facts about Jackson's attitude toward her lot as a "housewife" and indications that Hyman was strongly encouraging of Jackson's work and that, at the very least, his influence on her was contradictory. Ultimately, for ideological reasons, Franklin misrepresents the marital relationship.

An objective grasp of the social dynamics of the epoch would provide a better grasp of the dilemmas Jackson and Hyman confronted.

Hyman joined the Young Communist League while in university and vigorously pursued what he imagined to be Marxism for a number of years in the late 1930s. Although Jackson was more skeptical, perhaps to her credit, about the Stalinist regime in the USSR, she also followed events such as the Spanish Civil War with great interest. They belonged, as a *New Yorker* profile observed, to "a social set that included [poet] Howard Nemerov, [novelist] Ralph Ellison, [novelist] Bernard Malamud, and [blacklisted screenwriter] Walter Bernstein."

In regard to the couple and their discontents, as we argued in a recent review of a film about Jackson, "one senses the disappointment, disillusionment and even depression that the Eisenhower years generated within a generation of left, bohemian intellectuals. They felt at odds with the American population, isolated from and betrayed by it."

Jackson's life and fate, in other words, were bound up with big historical processes and problems, "the Great Depression, the Second World War, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, fascism and anti-Semitism, the Cold War and McCarthyism, the climate of the 1950s." No serious consideration of this is to be found in Franklin's biography, which follows the current identity politics line of least resistance.

The *Times*, Norton, Franklin and company have ganged up on Bailey and his biography of Roth in an unprincipled and cowardly manner. They fully deserve the shame their actions will ultimately bring them.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site