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Response #1

1. What surprised you the most in both of the two assigned readings for today, and why?

I was surprised that some academic historians have taken biography less seriously than other kinds of history. Nasaw calls it the “profession’s unloved stepchild” and explains that graduate students are discouraged from writing biographies, younger professors are advised to wait until after tenure, and some university libraries discourage purchasing them (Nasaw, 573). That seems strange to me because learning about people’s lives is part of what makes history interesting. I understand expecting more from a biography than a list of life events, but these attitudes seem to judge the approach before considering what an individual book accomplishes. Nasaw’s examples made me wonder why a subject that draws readers into history would need so much defending within the profession.

Nasaw’s example of an early medieval woman made me question how narrowly I had understood biography. Robin Fleming calls her subject “Eighteen,” the number archaeologists assigned her. Skeletal remains and burial evidence suggested a healthy childhood, leprosy, an early death, and an honorable burial. Fleming emphasizes “the particular face of a very real woman” whose remains can be studied alongside those of people buried around her (Fleming, quoted in Nasaw, 576). I had expected biography to require someone’s name and personal records. Her example shows that historians can take an individual life seriously even when the available evidence permits only a partial account.

What surprised me most in DeMasi’s article was the judgment needed to turn incomplete and sometimes conflicting evidence into a trustworthy account. Her biography of Henry Garfield Alsberg, director of the Federal Writers’ Project, took seven years and involved 642 citations, sixteen archive visits, and approximately seven thousand miles of travel. She calls this pursuit “scholarly stalking” (DeMasi, 17). The phrase made me smile, but the scale of the project also raised a practical question for me. After gathering that much material, how does a writer decide what it establishes? Her examples show why research requires attention to the quality and limits of each discovery.

Her account of Alsberg’s arrival in Hoboken shows how those decisions affect the narrative. A ship manifest identified New York City as the arrival location, but shipping information established that the Rijndam docked in Hoboken. She consulted a museum librarian about transportation into Manhattan and used a newspaper to research the streets (DeMasi, 21). These sources helped her reconstruct the setting and identify a plausible route. Although they do not independently document every movement Alsberg made after leaving the ship, they show how a biographer can distinguish between records of a person’s actions and historically grounded knowledge of a setting. Knowing the setting can make a scene historically convincing without claiming certainty about every detail of a person’s experience.

The research also corrected more consequential accounts of Alsberg’s life. Earlier writings said he quit the Federal Writers’ Project, but DeMasi found records showing that he was fired. She also investigated discrimination connected to his sexuality. Her investigation included interviews with people who had known Alsberg, with permission to use information they provided. She found no direct evidence that his sexual orientation caused his dismissal from the Writers’ Project. FBI files, however, supported her account that discrimination contributed to a forced resignation from a later position with the Office of

War Information (DeMasi, 20). I appreciated her keeping those findings separate. It would have been easy to connect the two events once discrimination appeared in the records. Her statement, “Veracity in storytelling is key,” becomes more meaningful because she shows the difference between finding evidence and assuming that it explains everything (DeMasi, 20).

Her unresolved searches show another limit to what a biography can establish. A portrait of Alsberg had been discarded months before she learned about it. She located his elderly cousin Elizabeth, a Holocaust survivor, and heard family stories, but they could not determine whether Elizabeth and Henry were second or third cousins (DeMasi, 22). I appreciated her acknowledging those gaps. The interview remained valuable without settling the exact relationship. These examples connect to my main surprise about her research: persistence can produce remarkable discoveries, but the writer still has to recognize what remains unknown.

2. What overall light did reading both of these shed on varying approaches to doing biography?

The readings gave me a broader understanding of how a biographer’s questions shape the account. Nasaw emphasizes the relationship between an individual and the surrounding world. He quotes Oscar Handlin’s explanation that biography concerns “the point at which the two interact” (Handlin, quoted in Nasaw, 574). His example of Martin Duberman’s biography of Paul Robeson makes this concrete. Duberman opens with race relations in Princeton and Robeson’s grandfather’s escape from slavery, establishing conditions that matter to understanding Robeson’s experiences (Nasaw, 574). Beginning there gives the reader a reason to consider the family’s past and the community’s racial divisions before interpreting one person’s actions.

DeMasi’s approach shows how family research can answer similar questions. A biography of Alsberg’s brother Carl supplied childhood anecdotes, census records located the family, and passenger manifests documented a childhood visit to Germany. University records and Alsberg’s student writings provided evidence of his education and developing outlook (DeMasi, 18–20). She asks, “Who were his role models? What were his values, and how did he live out those values?” (DeMasi, 18). Her attention to family makes sense to me because knowing who raised and influenced someone can help us understand choices that might otherwise seem disconnected. The records become more useful when the writer has questions that connect them to the life being studied.

Alsberg’s work also explains why recovering his life matters. The Federal Writers’ Project produced state guides and collected thousands of life histories from immigrants, formerly enslaved people, and others whose experiences could easily have gone unrecorded (DeMasi, 18, 21). Writing about him therefore opens a way to study how those other stories were preserved. I find that connection especially interesting: a biography of one person can reveal the decisions behind the historical sources later readers use to understand many people.

Nasaw’s discussion of identity adds another challenge. Quoting Jo Burr Margadant, he describes “an individual with multiple selves” whose behavior and presentation can change with time and circumstances (Margadant, quoted in Nasaw, 576). A public statement may reflect professional expectations, while a private letter may reveal concerns that the subject would not have expressed publicly. I would want to know who created each source and who was meant to read it before treating the differences as dishonesty. A private account is not necessarily the most reliable one, either. The biographer needs to assess the evidence while considering how relationships and expectations shaped

each account. Nasaw also allows for people to question their circumstances and act upon them, so context should not become an explanation that makes every decision seem inevitable (Nasaw, 577).

DeMasi's organization of research shows how interpretation develops during the work. She made chapter timelines containing life events, document references, and rough passages. Paper records were arranged by theme and chronology, while computer folders were organized by chapter (DeMasi, 19). A timeline could reveal a gap or show that events happened in an unexpected order. I think that matters when explaining someone's choices. The biographer knows how the story ends, but the subject did not. An account needs to respect what someone could have known when making a decision rather than treating the outcome as inevitable.

The treatment of personal details shows how the readings support each other. Nasaw discusses Carl Rollyson's criticism that Michael Wreszin omitted alleged affairs from his biography of Dwight Macdonald. A footnote explains that Wreszin lacked credible evidence that the affairs occurred. Nasaw asks whether such information, if established, would contribute to understanding Macdonald's work or historical setting (Nasaw, 574–575). DeMasi demonstrates how selected, verified details can clarify a scene or experience (DeMasi, 21). The readings ask two questions about the same information: whether the detail is accurate and what it contributes to the account.

Both readings distinguish interpretation from invention. DeMasi used congressional hearing transcripts to include dialogue directly supported by the record (DeMasi, 20). Nasaw discusses Virginia Woolf's criticism of Lytton Strachey's biography of Elizabeth I, which mixed evidence with imagination. Woolf found the result unconvincing and insisted that the biographer's "sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe" (Woolf, quoted in Nasaw, 578). I like that description because it suggests continuing attention. A biographer can interpret actions and explain circumstances while recognizing that an attractive explanation may exceed the evidence. Documented dialogue offers one way to make an account vivid while allowing readers to trace its source.

Nasaw and DeMasi leave me with two questions about writing a biography: what can this life explain about its historical moment, and what evidence allows the writer to make that explanation? Nasaw shows how biography can examine the ways a person responded to historical circumstances without treating those circumstances as destiny. DeMasi shows the patience, organization, and judgment required to build that account from scattered records. Reading both makes me more cautious about a story that seems complete simply because it reads smoothly. I want to understand the person, but I also want to recognize where the writer has interpreted a letter or interview, connected evidence from separate records, or reached the limit of what can be established.