

Ron Chernow, John T. Matteson,
and Stacy Schiff
with James W. Atlas,
and Philip Kunhardt

Er(r)go. Teoria–Literatura–Kultura
Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture
Nr / No. 43 (2/2021)
auto/bio/grafia
auto/bio/graphy
ISSN 2544-3186
<https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.11685>



Transcribed and edited by

John T. Matteson

John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3093-7561>

Is Biography True?

Abstract: On March 25, 2015, The Center for the Study of Transformative Lives at New York University and the NYU Biography Seminar co-hosted a panel discussion titled *Is Biography True?* Introduced by Philip Kunhardt and hosted by the late James Atlas, the panel featured three Pulitzer Prize winning biographers: Ron Chernow, author of *Washington: A Life*; John Matteson, author of *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father*; and Stacy Schiff, author of *Vera, Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov*. The following is a transcript of that discussion; click or scan the code below to watch it.

Keywords: biography, truth, theory of biography, practice of biography, immersion, a biographer's tale, panel discussion, New York University, The Center for the Study of Transformative Lives, Pulitzer Prize



Scan or click the code above
to watch the discussion.

Kunhardt: What a marvelous view I have, looking at you all. I'm Philip Kunhardt. I am the director of NYU's Center for the Study of Transformative Lives, and it's my great pleasure to welcome you here tonight for this marvelous evening. How good to have Stacy Schiff and John Matteson and Ron Chernow with us tonight. What an abundance of riches! (applause). And thank you all for being here, because I think it's quite a special audience we have tonight. Some of you are neighbors and close friends. Others are new to these events. But all of us have been drawn together because of an intense love and interest in the understanding of human lives. My co-sponsoring organization, NYU's Biography Seminar, consists of professional and academic biographers who meet regularly to discuss each other's work and support one another in their art and practice of biography. The Center,

in a somewhat different focus, exists to bring lives and their study more explicitly into the academic arena, particularly in their capacity to inspire students and members of the public who are hungry for life models. This is actually an old concept: the study of lives as part of the life-building project – how both positive and negative examples, carefully considered, can help people navigate their own complex lives. My hope is that, after a deep exposure over the course of a semester, my students will never forget the person they have studied, and he or she, flaws and all, will become a touch point in their lives. Speaking of her [inaudible]-hearted friends and mentor Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt once said, “Every so often, someone emerges among us who realizes human existence in an exemplary way and is the bodily incarnation of.” I like that. So it was natural that my Center and I, with our deep interest in learning from lives, should find our way to NYU’s thirty-year-old biography seminar, for biographers are those who study lives most deeply, spending years immersed in their subjects until they understand them in their bones, each biographer in his or her own way.

I’d like to thank Anne Heller, the upcoming biographer of Hannah Arendt, for her enormous role in tonight’s event and also her colleague at the Biography Seminar Charles DeFanti, also Kaitlyn Hearst who welcomed you here tonight at the desk, the Center’s Assistant Director. And to all friends and supporters who are here, I want to thank you profoundly. The Center needs allies and partners to make this dream an ongoing reality.

Our moderator tonight is a distinguished biographer himself of the poet Delmore Schwartz and of the American novelist Saul Bellow. He is a legendary editor and publisher who has worked for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and other distinguished journals, and he was the creator and editor of the Penguin Lives, one of my favorite series, also of HarperCollins’ Eminent Lives, and now a new series of short biographies for Amazon Publishing. He is currently writing a book on his life in the world of biography, provocatively titled, I think, Jim, *The Shadow in the Garden?*

Atlas: Yes, that’s right.

Kunhardt: Thank you.

Atlas: *A Biographer’s Tale*.

Kunhardt: *A Biographer’s Tale*. James will introduce our esteemed panelists and then guide us through a series of questions that will keep us focused on the evening’s topic: Is Biography True? What is the relationship between the life lived and the life written? It’s going to be fun. And so I give you our moderator and my friend and colleague, James Atlas (applause).

Atlas: So, Philip, I was going to thank all the people who you thanked, so I’ll just focus on you instead. Um, but Philip has created something that all writers

and scholars aspire to create, and that is, ah, this hive of activity at NYU called the Center for Transformative Lives, which has, you didn't emphasize enough, I think, the theme of uplift that determines the choices of people and history who you have, focused on, like, ah, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King. If I had a center like yours, I think it would have a very different focus, in that my transformative lives would be Beckett and Kafka (laughter), but that's a reason to be around you, is that you're inspiring in that way and positive. So I have managed to hook up with Philip here. I'm very lucky that I did. This event, you can hardly imagine, he's incredibly, I was gonna say insanelly, but I'll just say incredibly detail oriented, and, what you see here is a room of chairs and some more chairs up here and tables, has actually taken months to figure out how this all works. I know more about platforms now than I do about biography – their size, their cost and how it all works, ha, but it is a, it is a joint venture, and um, the Biography Seminar which is actually forty years old, not thirty years old, even more venerable that we would imagine. Ah, it's a group I've fortunately stumbled on over the last couple years where biographers are brought in out of the cold to sit around and talk about their works in progress, and, ah, it's very nurturing because, as you can imagine, biography is really an isolating task where we spend months and years in our libraries, in our rooms, not working and not talking to anyone, and then we get to go to the Biography Seminar, and it's a very satisfying experience. So, tonight we have three panelists, all of whom, I can just say this once so I don't have to say it three times, are Pulitzer Prize winners. We only have Pulitzer Prize winners on our panels (laughter). You all made the cut there, congratulations. And, ah, they're very, yeah, they're on the fast track, too, they are in fact not just sitting in the library. Ron Chernow here, whose book, a biography of Hamilton has turned into this incredible hit, headed for Broadway, a hip-hop musical. That's what you intended, right, when you wrote the book? I'm gonna write this book for ten years, just so it can get made into a – But actually I've heard gossip that you're at the theater every night, so we're lucky to –

Chernow: Yeah, almost every night. I promise I'll try not to lapse into hip-hop this evening, although it may be slightly difficult, given my life at the moment, but I'll do my best.

Atlas: And, uh, and Stacy here, whose last book, *Cleopatra*, is in development with Angelina Jolie, whose, ah, problem, medical problems you can read about in today's paper, and uh, so that's Angelina Jolie and Broadway, and John Matesson, author of the biography of Margaret Fuller. I'm sure you're going to tell me that's gonna be a miniseries starring Reese Witherspoon?

Matteson: I think I'm the Ringo Starr of this quartet, actually, but still glad to be up here.

Atlas: Anyway they're all big stars, and we're very honored to have them here, and our question, our initial question about, ah, is biography true, is so taxing that I'm gonna just shelve it for a minute and ask each of them if they would talk briefly about how they got into this peculiar profession and how you're gonna get out of it (laughter) – no, how it developed over the years in your thinking. So, maybe you could begin, Stacy.

Schiff: Do you think I should use a microphone?

Atlas: Sure.

Schiff: Oh, okay. Thanks, Jim. Thank you all for coming. There are a lot of biographers in this audience, um, so I'm just gonna go out on a limb and wager that, um, no one ever sits on the stoop as a child and says: "I'm gonna be a biographer when I grow up." I mean, I certainly didn't. I still want to be an architect or a Rockette. And I think I came to biography mostly from the love of reading biography. I liked to read history through the lens of a sensibility if not a personality. And there's a wonderful quote of Ad Reinhardt's where he essentially says that sculpture is the thing you trip over when you're looking at paintings in a museum. And I feel like – he says it a little more delicately, actually a little more demeaningly, – and I felt like biography is the same kind of thing, that the personality that lives from the page when you're reading history is what always had enchanted me. That's from a writerly point of view – that's from a *readerly* point of view. From a writerly point of view, you know what people say about cats is kind of true about biographers, that a biographer is never alone. You're always in communion with some – whether you want to be or not – in communion with some other sensibility and some other life, and you're possessed in some way by a different perspective. Um, sometimes that makes you want slit your wrists, but it's a sort of fascinating dual vision, and I've really thrilled to that at all times as a way to sort of pretend to, anyway, understand a life, because of course you know you have no hope of understanding your own. There are two other things I guess I would say are gratifying, to me, anyway about writing biography. One is that, um, there's a very clear beginning, middle, and an end. I've tended as I've gone on to disregard that more and more, but there is an inherent structure to this sport. And the other gratification, I think we can all agree is that, um, unlike most other disciplines, um, you in the end get to kill off your hero in the end (laughter).

Atlas: Can I have that for a second, sorry. When you memorize your remarks, you tend to forget certain things that are very important. I sound like the Academy Awards speech here, but I did want to make sure that Anne Heller was specifically thanked, though she was mentioned by Philip, for the work she's done here in creating this program. She's really my co-partner with the Biography Seminar, and also, ah, John Maynard, who is, ah, our director, but he happens

to be on a Greek isle now. Um, this is why people go into academic life... but, so, anyway, that is done, and I feel better.

Chernow: Yeah, kind of like Stacy I look out over the audience and I see so many wonderful biographers in the audience. I feel that we could trade places with about half the audience so we all feel a little bit humble sitting up here tonight. I agree with what you said Stacy that I think that in the lives of most biographers there's a large element of happenstance and accident that led to their becoming biographers. You know, in my case I knew from the time that I was a teenager that I wanted to be a writer, but I thought I was going to be a fiction writer, and I was just saying to John that I did two degrees in English literature and I never took a single history course, the reason being I was always taking a course in the novel, usually the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel, with these gigantic reading lists, and history courses had gigantic reading lists, and so I could never see how I could take them at the same time, so, for better or for worse, everything that I've written about has been self-taught. But when I got out of school I started working as a free-lance magazine writer, but I was always scribbling short stories nights and weekends, which never got published but I persisted in that error for many years. And then what happened, when I started I think writing my first book, *The House of Morgan*, all the years that I had spent thinking about narrative, you know, basic elements of fiction, whether it was voice, pacing, point of view, portraiture, et cetera, all of it flowed quite naturally into, um, biography. So I suspect that a lot of biographers are actually, like me, novelists *manqués*.

Matteson: It's always seemed to me that I didn't find biography; it's more as if biography found me. I, back, fourteen years ago was just an assistant professor at John Jay College who'd written an article in *NEQ* about something that had nothing to do with biography, and I got a phone call from a literary agent, and he said, "Hi, my name's Peter Steinberg and I've read your article and I'd like to explore representing you for a non-fiction book. And so all of a sudden, here I am, I'm like Lana Turner, I've been discovered in the diner. And so I said, "Well, that's great, but I have no idea what, what you would want me to write about, because I'm writing literature articles and trying to teach four classes a semester. He said, "Don't worry. Come to lunch. We'll work it out." Um, and we came away from that lunch, um, with the idea that I would write a book about nineteenth-century Utopian communities. It was something that just kind of, you know, interested me. And the first one that I started researching was Fruitlands, which was founded by, or co-founded by Bronson Alcott. And I thought, this is great, because I know he wrote journals from the time he was 25 until the time he had a stroke at eighty-two and couldn't write anymore, and so these journals on Fruitlands are just gonna be amazing, I'm gonna look at those, my life will be easy, I get up to the Houghton

Library at Harvard and discover that the Fruitlands journals have been lost. Oh. Okay. So already there's a huge hole in my, you know, in my topic. But I started reading around in the other years of Bronson Alcott journals. I thought, this guy's fascinating. So I went back to the agent and said, "I'm not gonna write the utopia book, I'm going to write a biography of Bronson Alcott." He said, "Okay, fine, I don't know who he is, but if you say so." But then the real inspiration hit me and it actually dates back to, uh, when I was in grad school. I came back to graduate school very late, and as I was getting ready to take my orals I became a dad, uh, this wonderful little girl who actually turned 21 just this past week. And, uh, and I became the stay-at-home dad, looking after my daughter because my wife was working fulltime to support us. Here I am in graduate school with no income and so I became an expert in changing diapers and warming up formula and things like that, and thinking to myself, you know, why in the world is this happening to me? Because, you know, all of my colleagues are going to their first conferences and they're publishing articles and they're gonna get great jobs, and here I am, you know, with drool down the front, some of it not even my own (laughter). And so what was all of this heading toward? Well, what it was heading toward was that I developed this appreciation for parenthood, and I wanted to know more about what it was to be a dad. And, and here's Bronson Alcott, this quixotic, education-obsessed man who has a daughter who is very verbally gifted, and I thought: "Oh my gosh, this is my book." I'm the quixotic, you know, education-crazed guy with a daughter, and I'm just going to write a book that's going to show me something about fatherhood that I don't know; I'm going to use my own experiences to kind of read between the lines of the diaries and the journals, and that's really how I became a biographer. I would not be here, I wouldn't be doing any of this if it were not for family and for that personal connection. But to make an already very long story short, I'm with you, Ron, in that I'm a frustrated novelist, too. I would love to write soaring works of original fiction, but I can't come up with characters and plot, right? But you agree with me, that there's something that happens when you're in an archive, and you see the letters and the journals and all of a sudden you can tell the story. And so, uh, I know that – I've heard Stacy speak many times and she's fond of saying that a biography, er, a biographer, rather, is a novelist under oath. And we – I think that's probably true of all of us, that we just want to tell stories, and we want to connect with humanity, which is something that obviously Phil knows a lot about. The last thing I want to say before we get into the main part of the program – you said that you hope your students will never forget the person you study? I am positive they will never forget the person they study with (applause).

Atlas: So... that's very interesting. You all (to Stacy) did you want to be a frustrated novelist? (laughter). Or did you want to be a novelist? Nobody wants to be a frustrated novelist. Except the guys I worship who I mentioned before already. Uh, but I, it's very interesting to now tiptoe into this subject, ah, what, and I hope I don't sound inane, but, but, what is the real difference between fiction and non-fiction? The difference of course is that non-fiction is true, allegedly, but – and we try to be as, as accurate as we can. That's part of our work. But what is it that you wrestle with when you have your documents and you have your letters and you have your interviews, not you with Cleopatra, and whatever else you have, how do you construct this in a way that feels true? That's true, not just in the facts, but in the whole experience of reading it? (to Stacy) Yes, you can talk now.

Schiff: Thank you (laughing). Well, I think that you want to draw on the novelistic experience or at least the novelistic insight that we all have. The problem is that you're doing it with your hands tied behind your back because, of course, you have only – I think, anyway, your material with which to work. So, although you might like to say what someone looks like, if you don't know what he or she looks like, you're pretty much stymied in describing their entrance into a room. So you're essentially writing your way – at least I tend to find myself to be – you're writing your way around the holes in the material, and you're going wherever the material takes you, which is not necessarily where the narrative would take you, um, if you had your druthers. I feel like everyone else is writing poetry. We're having to write sestinas. There's something – you're so much more cramped by the constraints of the material, and it's your job to, you know, somehow arrange for a kind of comb-over where nobody notices the holes in the, you know, in the material and nobody sort of – oops! – nobody notices that Cleopatra didn't have a childhood because, Lord knows, we don't know what it consisted of.

Atlas: Yeah, Ron, tell us.

Chernow: I think that when you're writing a biography that there are basically two things that are going on every day. One is building, and one is architecture. The readers like to, you know, talk and respond to the architecture, but basically what you're doing is brick upon brick. You're laying out a chronology. That's the first thing that you have to do, is to master an enormous number of facts and, you know, present them. We say, when all else fails you can fall back on a chronology, which is what we do, but I think that what really makes it come alive is that you take that, that chronology, and then you build a structure, a kind of scaffolding of, you know, themes and observations around it, and that's where biography is a highly subjective thing. I mean, you know, this panel is called, you know, Is Biography True? Um, in fact biography is a very human, it's a very subjective enterprise. Um, there is no truth that we're going for. We're kind of really presenting our truth and,

um, our observations about the characters, so it becomes a sort of approximation of the truth, it's a never-ending process. One of my favorite quotes about history is the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl said that history is an argument without end. Well, biography is an argument without end. And, you know, one thing that I've learned over the years is never, for my biographies or anyone's biographies, never use the word "definitive," which is a very, very dangerous word. I'm content if my publisher wants to call it authoritative; that's very flattering. Authoritative means that you've kind of mastered the available facts, you've scoured all the archives and the research, but, um, the word "definitive" always implies that you have settled the question of this person's life once and for all. Whereas in fact I feel that biography is a very, it's a collective enterprise. It's a communal enterprise. You're adding to a long kind of, you know, history of people writing about this subject, and, um, even if you feel that you've had the last word about the subject, sure as shooting you'll wake up one morning and there in the *New York Times* – you feel that you have done this person forever – there is a fresh biography, um, that purports to have new things to say and is kind of disputing what you had to say about this, so it's a collective enterprise and it's an open-ended one.

Matteson: One of the things I love about it most is that you can't have the last word, and in fact, uh, it's a big mistake, uh, if you are writing a biography, uh, to, to think that you're going to put all of the conversations to rest. It's a much better ambition to start a conversation, and to get people asking new questions. That's the genre and how the enterprise really stay alive. I was going to argue a little bit with something that James said about fiction not being true and nonfiction being true. Because I think there's an odd sense in which fiction is truer, and here's where I'm going with that. We can all agree that, in *The Great Gatsby*, Myrtle Wilson gets killed by a car being driven by Daisy Buchanan. There's no way of impeaching that because there is one text that is authoritative that says that that happened. Okay. Whereas when you're trying to recapture the past and when you're trying to write something that is allegedly non-fiction, you want, as you say to come to the closest approximation as possible of what actually did happen, but what actually did happen is ninety-nine percent inaccessible, right, because, um, you know, the documents that you're working with are already a massive edit of the three-dimensional experience as it was lived, and, ah, as much as we would love to return to the past, there's a sense in which a moment stops being true at the moment that it stops being a moment. And after that it's just recollection and what's written down or what is reported, and it's inherently unstable and unreliable. So, what do you do with that? You read as many sources as you possibly can and you retrace the steps of previous biographers. You visit the places if you can, and yet still at that point you can't be sure that even what you be-

hold with your own two eyes is a true representation of what things were like at the time that you're writing about. I'll just give a quick case in point, and we can get to the next question, but when I was writing my first book, *Eden's Outcasts*, I went to Concord, Massachusetts, where the Alcotts lived, in order to get a sense of the physical ground, and you can do that fairly well in Concord because it's still very pastoral and a lot of the old buildings are still there. But I was looking at, you know, what kinds of trees are there, what kinds of birds? Ah! There are cardinals in the tree. How wonderful. I'll use that as a detail in the book. I'll write about the cardinals flitting through the trees in Concord. The book comes out. It's in hardcover. I get an e-mail from an irate ornithologist (laughter). And that irate ornithologist says, "Cardinals did not come to Concord until the twentieth century. You, sir, are a fraud!" And, yeah, so I didn't account for climate change and the fact that the ranges of birds differed depending on what century you're talking about. What can you do in that situation? The only thing I could do was to write back to him and thank him profusely, and fix it in the paperback. And it's fixed in the paperback. But invariably you can be absolutely sure of a detail, and then discover that, that, your sureness was, was founded on, on sand.

Schiff: The problem is it's never the detail that you thought it was, that you're wrong about.

Matteson: Right.

Atlas: That's a terrifying story, John (laughter). Completely has a chilling effect. But, uh, but anyway, say you do get what we call the facts, which I could dispute the whole idea of, but if you've got the facts right, then where are you in this very subtle and fraught issue of the mind of your subject? What can you say about that? You can't just talk about the birds. They want to know about the people. And where are you with that?

Schiff: Sometimes you're lost. I mean, why does anybody – ideally, you hope for the diaries or the letters. Um, I had a similar case where I had promised the publisher I would write my book on the Nabokovs based on their correspondence, only to discover that we only have one side of the correspondence. And then I made multiple trips to Switzerland to try to find the other side of the correspondence every time papers turned up, and of course they never turned up. My greatest nightmare is that today, they will now turn up. Um, but, even in a diary or an autobiography, you're not necessarily dealing with, um, your truth, especially if it's a published autobiography. And I guess I would probably cite Benjamin Franklin as my favorite example of that. I mean, we have from Franklin's autobiography his sort of Dickensian entry into Philadelphia as a seventeen-year-old runaway, and he, you know, writes this sort of archetypal scene in which he arrives in Philadelphia to make his fortune with his two puffy rolls that he buys under

his arms, and his future wife just happens to be on the scene watching him go by, you know, they aren't yet going to meet for several years, but if you actually look in the Franklin archives you notice that Franklin arrived in Philadelphia at night, which was an unlikely time to be buying fresh-baked goods and walking around Philadelphia with them under your arm. There are a lot of things about Franklin's autobiography that are rather suspect like the fact that it is an ode to diligence and industry but it's unfinished (laughter). I mean, you know, there are all kinds of things that, you know, you might want to think twice about. This is a book that is written with a tongue wedged firmly in the cheek. So you know here you have this brilliant, you, know, really seminal autobiography, and you can't really take it at its word, either. I don't think I answered your question. I think I just made it worse (laughter).

Chernow: I've often thought that biographical subjects, they fall into one of two camps. There are those people who seem to live in order to please and delight their future biographers. They save all of their correspondence. They're constantly keeping journals, they're very verbal, they're recording everything, and then there are those people who live to baffle and frustrate and madden their biographers, and I invariably seem to write about people in the second group, even though the people I've written about, these are sort very well documented lives. Well, the people I've written about have struck me as very, very closed personalities, even Alexander Hamilton, who I think was arguably the most, you know, verbal personality who ever, ever lived. In fact, you know, Hamilton was dead by the age of forty-nine. He left behind thirty-two thick volumes of papers. In fact, you know, the editor at Columbia University Press Harold – used to joke that he wanted to dedicate the volumes to Aaron Burr, without whose cooperation the project would never have been completed (laughter). And yet it's amazing. Here was this person at the drop of a hat he could write, you know, a perfectly worded ten thousand memo literally overnight on any conceivable subject. He was a very, very secretive character. Here was someone who spent the entire first third of his life in the Caribbean, and I could find only one sentence in the 32 volumes that referred to the first third of his, ah, life. So, he's just kind of chattering away about almost any abstract, you know, topic he could tell you about. So the people that I've written about have been very, very closed, and, um, you know, there've been moments when I've felt sorry for myself. Why did I pick these people, you know, who were sort of born to frustrate me, but actually I find that it's made it much, much more interesting, I guess – that it's the thrill of the hunt, that if someone is kind of opening himself or herself up to you, it's sort of less interesting than someone who, at every turn, and, you know, every time you spy them, they're turning the corner out of sight.

Matteson: There's a lot of inspired guesswork that goes on, um, particularly with trying to probe the inner processes of a mind, because, ah, I would hazard that, you know, none of us ever creates a transcript of what we're thinking from moment to moment, so there is this kind of inner person who's forever inaccessible. Um, I've been recently reading some of the work of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senior, the poet and author of *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, and he says when you're having a conversation with someone, you're actually having a conversation with three people at once. You're having a conversation with the person who is actually who they are, but only, basically Holmes says only God knows who that is. Ah, and he says it in a very literal way. And then there's the person that the person you're talking to thinks that, that they are, and that's number two; and then third is the person you think you're talking to, and they're all different, okay, and so even the most simple conversation becomes very crowded very quickly, because there are three of you, there are three of them and the nine possible permutations of connection and it just gets a little bit ridiculous (laughter). You now, I've been fortunate in the two books that I've written thus far, in that both Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller were obsessive chroniclers of their thoughts, to, um, almost to the utmost degree that's humanly possible. Bronson Alcott, you know people say Bronson Alcott never did anything; it's because he was writing everything down. Um, and in fact, you know, he says in his journals, I find that I cannot both write my life and live my life. And, uh, it's fortunate for people who have an interest in the Alcotts that there's so much about, that he did record. You know, he kept scrapbooks of everything that happened, and so the records are, are extraordinarily rich, and then Margaret Fuller also has this very rich interior life that she puts principally into her letters; her journals are more fragmentary. Um, but, um, at the end of the day, I think that what we try to do is to represent our subjects both in the ways in which they are exceptional, in the ways in which they differ from the rest of us, but also in the ways in which we're similar. You know, how can I relate to this person who happened to be the first secretary of the treasury or the empress of, of Egypt. And, um, but at the same time, to, um, to understand the exceptionalness. Um, and, you do the best you can.

Chernow: You know I think that people are constantly, um, hiding and obfuscating, even in their writings, even if the writings pretend to be very confessional. But truth will out and I feel very strongly that people will reveal themselves. They can't help but reveal themselves, and I always this, uh, story. When I decided to do the biography of John D. Rockefeller, uh, for the first time I had unrestricted access to Rockefeller's papers, and I was constantly running up to Pocantico and a place called the Rockefeller Archive Center, and I would spend three days, um, a week up there. And there were tens of thousands of letters that Rockefeller

wrote as the head of Standard Oil, and a typical Rockefeller letter when he was running Standard Oil: “Dear Sir: I read yours of the 26th. Would recommend that you proceed with all due caution. Signed, John D. Rockefeller” (laughter). There were never any, you know, proper nouns. He was always, um, describing things, um, in this very kind of glancing and indirect, uh, way, and I realized that he was writing every single, uh, letter as if it might someday fall into the hands of an investigating committee or prosecuting attorneys. So, anyway, I remember one night I was, after another very frustrating day at the archives, because here I felt I had unrestricted access to his papers, and I was expecting that I would find one explosive, you know, revelation after another, and I was just coming up dry. He was baffling me, you know, day after day, letter after letter. And I was describing this situation to my wife, and I was saying, you know, this was a terrible mistake to do this book. This man is completely closed and impenetrable, and I started describing the way that he wrote. He was directing what was the largest business empire in the world through all of these two- and three- little, um, uh, sentence letters. I was getting angrier and angrier and I looked across the table at my wife, who was smiling. And I said, “What are you smiling at? I’ve just made this catastrophic mistake doing this book.” And she said to me, “What you’re describing is absolutely fascinating.” She said, “You’re kind of trying to look around him, she said, the story is right in front of your eyes. This story is of a man who was so smart and so secretive that he could run this worldwide empire through all of these kind of, you know, winks and hints and cues. She said that you’re looking for a more kind of conventional tycoon. I had written about J. P. Morgan, you know, someone who would roar and bluster, and Rockefeller was not like that at all. But she said to me: “You’ve found a true original, but you’re kind of not seeing the originalities right in front of your face.” And that was actually a very, very interesting letter because in fact Rockefeller was telling me more about himself through all of these cryptic little notes that he was, uh, writing. Then, of course, what happened, the way that the archives were structured is that the incoming letters were in one place, and then his outgoing letters were in another. As I began to match up the incoming letters with his outgoing letters, there might be, for instance, a ten-page letter saying, we bribed the entire Maryland legislator, legislature (laughter) to get through this pipeline, and then Rockefeller would write, “Received yours of the 26th. Proceed with all due caution. Signed John D. Rockefeller” – gave a whole different spin to it.

Atlas: So let’s say as responsible biographers who have spent many years in the craft that you assemble all this information, and you’ve gotten it right except for the cardinals (laughter), but what about the unconscious of your subject? Can you say “he felt”? Can you say that you definitively know some aspect of this character’s emotions that you can’t possibly know?

Matteson: Okay, Stacy's been very brave taking the first stab at all of these questions that are coming rapid-fire. Okay! So, I'll do the best I can. You know, I think that something every aspiring biographer asks I, how much can I rely on saying "must have"? Or "might have"? Or – exactly – how much can you speculate? And I – there's almost always some kind of way around it, uh, and sometimes it involves sort of lawyering your way around the language a little bit. For instance, when Bronson and Louisa May Alcott are saying farewell to the youngest Alcott, um, sister, May Alcott – she's on her way to Europe in hopes of becoming a famous artist – and, uh, the entries in the journals gave me the date, they gave me name of the ship, they gave me the color of the hat that May was wearing, and they didn't say a word about what either Bronson or Louisa were thinking. And it's this dramatic moment because it's the last time they're ever going to see her though they don't know that yet, and I wanted really to do something with it and bring it alive and there was nothing in the record that, that really would support it. And so what I ended up writing was, I said something like, (affecting British accent) actually, I just happen to have it here. So I can get the actual, uh, the actual words for you. (Holds up a copy of *Eden's Outcasts*) Available still in better bookstores, but anyway – (laughter) um, okay, um, yes ah, la-la-la. "Bronson and Louisa escorted her as far as the dock. Prey to all the throat-constricting feelings that come with parting, they stood and watched as their blue-clad dear girl waved her handkerchief and the ship receded toward the horizon." Now, I don't know that they were feeling throat-constricting emotions. But they were certainly prey to them, and therefore I felt justified in putting that in, okay, so...

Atlas: Oh ...

Matteson: So Jim cries foul! Jim cries foul! And yet, counselor, how can you impeach what I've said? Anybody saying farewell to their child would be prey to those emotions whether they felt them or not.

Atlas: (inaudible)

Matteson: Oh! (laughing)

Atlas: Um, Dwight MacDonald, the fabled critic, uh, of another era, edited my first book for me, I was very lucky to have him, ah, and whenever I tried to, uh, I guess, an unfair word would be to say, obfuscate some fact, or, uh, insist that someone was having a throat-clearing moment he would write in the margin, "Weasel!" I love that (laughter). That's rung in my ears ever since.

Matteson: Okay. I used to be a lawyer, so I claim professional privilege. Um, but also on the subject of the mind and the unconscious mind, I've, I had an advantage with Louisa May Alcott because I was writing about a writer of fiction, and fiction can be extremely revelatory, not necessarily of the facts of a person's life,

but certainly of their mindset. You know, certainly, you know, Stacy, you've written about Vladimir Nabokov. It doesn't – there's nothing to suggest that Nabokov was Humbert in disguise or anything like that, and yet by reading what Nabokov wrote, you do get a sense of his playfulness, of his uh, delight in, in a sort of obfuscation that reveals and conceals at the same moment. And what I found with Louisa May Alcott was that she revealed herself sometimes in ways that she wasn't necessarily completely aware of. Um, the book that she said was, um, was closest to her heart and most representative, sort of, of her is a lesser-known book called *Moods*, in which the, uh, the heroine is essentially, um, bipolar, and, um, you know, lies in the dark with the curtains drawn for weeks at a time and then all of a sudden has bursts of energy and does all these death-defying things. And then I found out that Louisa had a sort of practice in her writing, where she would just work like crazy for seven weeks and not eat and not sleep and, you know, just, and still have excess energy to burn off running, and then she would collapse and be able to do nothing for months, and so, a-ha! But I never did say in the book that she was definitely bipolar, but I tried out all the evidence from both, um, the factual sources and from the clues in her fiction and I think was able to make a fairly reasonable case that this was someone who was at least on the bipolar spectrum, whether it was full blown or not. Ah, and so, um, it's a joy and a delight to work on someone who has written fiction, because it does this understanding of state of mind that, that sometimes even the journals and the letters may not.

Atlas: So, um, I've had proven to my satisfaction that biography is not true and, Philip, did you want to ask some questions? Is it early? Okay, then, sit tight and I'll ask some – all right, okay, I have many more things to ask.

Schiff: I just had two, and I think Ron had something, I just had two sort of contradictory things to say, uh, to what you said. The first is that one of the rare advantages you have as a biographer, although you do not have your subject's psychiatric sessions normally is that you have perspective on his or her life that he does not have on his life, so that, for example, when he writes the same love letter to a different woman thirteen years later, even though he is the greatest prose stylist of the twentieth century, you begin to know something about him that probably he didn't realize about himself. So there is, there's a certain added understanding I think that you bring to the table because you can see him repeating himself or repeating his fictions or his non-fictions over and over again. And, on the other hand, I would say, and I'm suddenly thinking of the Nabokovs again, which I haven't in a while. There's a hilarious moment in Andrew Field's 1977 biography where he has the Nabokovs returning to Ithaca, New York, um, after *Lolita* has become this worldwide sensation, they get off a train, Erie-Lackawanna in Ithaca, which is the middle of nowhere, and with their 29 suitcases, Nabokov

puts his hand up in the air and yells, "Porter!" And, of course, you know, there isn't a porter for hundreds of miles around. And, you know, if you pull the camera back a minute, you see that the story comes from Morris Bishop, who was one of Nabokov's Cornell colleagues who was on the train platform when the Nabokovs arrived, and when the Nabokovs heard this story they said, hilarious, hilarious, we did that for Morris's benefit. So, you know, were they acting, or was – who's telling the truth here? And there is, I think, a Heisenberg uncertainty principle with biography in terms of who is your source? And does the biographer's presence in the frame change the frame somewhat, too? So, you know, there's that piece of it that one always bears in mind, along with the context.

Atlas: How do you know if your subject is lying?

Schiff: You always assume they are, I think (laughter).

Chernow: In fact, I was about to say something that actually leads into your next question. Um, as I was saying before, all the people that I've written about, if they were alive today, would be complete strangers to the analytic couch, you know, they would run in the other direction from any, um, therapist. I'm now doing Ulysses S. Grant, who falls into that, um, category completely. And when I first started working on the book – um, uh, Grant, of course, wrote a famous memoir – and I ran into a wise-guy friend who kind of stopped me dead in my tracks. He said, "Ron, how can you write a great biography about somebody who wrote a great autobiography. And I have to admit I was, I was taken aback. Of course, Grant's memoir is not an autobiography. He omits several small things like his two-term presidency (laughter), so it doesn't really purport to be a complete life. It's mostly a military memoir, uh, really mostly military memoir of the Civil War and, to a certain extent, the Mexican War, and with his, you know, childhood and other pre-Civil War events sketched in very lightly. But for days I walked around thinking about that comment, how do you write a great biography about someone who's written a great, uh, memoir? And then what happened, so I then opened up the book one day and I just started checking off, um, in the margin the silences and the evasions, and I realized that, in a strange kind of way, my book was going to be a mirror image of Grant's memoirs, because every place that he went, er, went silent or went missing was exactly where I was going to, uh, zero in, so for instance, uh, you probably all know the story. You know, in St. Louis in the eighteen-fifties went through this terrible period of, uh, of failure to the point where he was selling firewood on the street corners of, uh, St. Louis. Well, in one sentence, he jumps over, I forget if it was three or four years of failure in one sentence, uh, and so basically what we're doing is that we're kind of homing in on exactly the places where the person doesn't want us to direct their

[sic] attention and then, conversely, there's places where they're dying to have us concentrate, we glance away.

Schiff: I was just going to say that would be like Ben Franklin's illegitimate son who doesn't appear in his autobiography but to whom it is addressed.

Atlas: But, um, if you, if you agree that all, that many of these sources are, are flawed and uncertain, how do you reconstruct – how do you construct a narrative that takes account of that while at the same time being authoritative in your own right? I mean, we spend so much time on these projects that we really end up feeling that we know, and we do know a great deal, but there's always this, uh, sense, uh, Henry James never saying, you know, the last word about any human heart. There's always this sense that you have to build in the, uh, incompleteness somehow, that, as you said, “definitive” is an illusion but also even the sense of really trying to claim authority is difficult.

Chernow: No, you know, I really think that the way we get to know people in biography is the same way that we get to know people in life. That is, you know, what I try to do – what I think most biographers try to do is to give you an enormous number of impressions, you know, to give you dozens, you know, maybe hundreds of anecdotes, hundreds of people commenting. And, at first, it seems like a cacophony of voices because these people are often saying very contradictory things. And yet we as the reader, if the biography is well done, we will come up with a very kind of sharp and vivid portrait of this person. It's kind of counterintuitive because we're getting so many contradictory impressions of this character but the same way that in life, you know, we're seeing someone day after day, every day, um, we see them. They may be in a different mood. We see a different, uh, side of them. We're hearing many different people give us many different perspectives on the same character, and yet when we're asked what someone is like, we will have a very strong sense, we have somehow managed to filter out, from all of these various impressions a coherent sense of this personality, and I think that biography works in a similar kind of way by osmosis. Yes, we're giving the narrative, yes, we're kind of, you know, providing a running commentary as we're giving the narrative. But basically the reader is kind of extracting from this abundance of often contradictory information, a portrait, that if it's well done I think will end up being coherent. And, you know, one of the things I always say to people is to sort of go out of your way to present contradictory information. Far from confusing the reader, that will actually clarify things for the reader because that's the way that real life is. We think we know about someone and then we learn something that completely contradicts what we understood, and we make that adjustment to our sense of them, but, indeed,

we have a strong sense of their personality. People are just very, very complicated, and I think that, uh, biography should reflect that.

Atlas: That's nice. That's nice.

Matteson: And, you know, another thing that we're always doing is we're narrating change. I think that ties into what you were saying – that we're not talking about a static person at a particular moment. We're not providing just one snapshot. We need to give you a film. Ah, and, and using contradictory perspectives is certainly one way of doing that. Uh, you know, my second book was called *The Lives of Margaret Fuller*, you know, with very conscious in, um, utmost in my consciousness, that fact that the person I was describing was a person of extraordinary complexity and someone who was incredibly protean and had to, in part, because she was a woman in the nineteenth century with limited opportunities, because of her sex had to reinvent herself steadily every couple of years. And one of the challenges of writing about her in fact was that the, um, the Ur-biography of Margaret Fuller was written by three of her friends including Ralph Waldo Emerson, uh, and none of these people had actually known her during the last six years of her life, because she had traveled to Rome and, uh, and she in Rome becomes a completely different person. She drops Transcendentalism, she drops so many of her influences and really tries to reconstruct herself in an even more radical way. And that transformation was utterly invisible to the people who thought that they knew her best and knew her well enough to write her first biography. Uh, so, it's, it's absolutely true that you can never run out of, or you can never say to yourself, "I've got enough perspectives now." Anything that you're able to add, you know, that adds just an iota or scintilla of information is going to add once again a sort of life and useful instability to, to the subject.

Schiff: I just want to say that, there I would say that context is so incredibly helpful as well, because, for me taking Ben Franklin from America to France was turning Ben Franklin to another side. I mean I think we all think of him as a man who always had something to say and was tremendously verbose and incredibly quotable. Who knew he was actually quite taciturn? And that didn't show up for me until I sort of switched – put him in a different world where suddenly what was referred to as his kind of, you know, kind of stubborn unwillingness to take a stand in America became in France his sublime taciturnity, because in France nobody listened to anybody, so the idea that somebody actually listened was shocking. And he's constantly described in Paris as someone who would listen to you if you came to talk with him. That was partly because his French was bad (laughter). But, but again, it's taking the figure out of the context to some extent to see better, either what he didn't want you to see, or what we don't normally see.

Atlas: So, um, Philip, I've failed to break these people despite my intensive questioning (laughter). They're still saying, they're stonewalling and saying it's true. So why don't you ask a question?

Kunhardt: I'm going to ask one question, and then Anne is going to ask one question, and then we're – then you'll ask the audience for some questions. How about that? All right, so my question I'd like to throw in the mix is – I said earlier that I'm interested – I love biography and I read biography, I depend on it for my work. But behind biography is the life itself. Isn't it true that a biographer, of all persons, must have a sense of humility before the life, so that you're aware of imposing your narrative scope upon a life that didn't really reflect that in itself? That's actually not my question (laughter). My question is that you spend years, uh, on some of these books that you write. And, uh, that's going to have an effect upon a person, as a human being. Do you ever have the feeling of actually communing with a life, uh, developing almost a kind of human connection, almost as if you knew them in some way, and do you trust feelings of subjectivity of that kind, or do you see them as the enemy and you're always striving for objectivity?

Matteson: Um, okay, I feel as if I know the Alcotts better than I know my own family because I don't read my own family's diaries, you know. The Alcotts, interestingly enough, did read each other's diaries, it was kind of required in the family that you passed them around and, interestingly enough, the only one who didn't go along with that was Lizzie Alcott who became Beth March in *Little Women* and she was the quietest one to begin with, but she absolutely, she put up a wall and said, no, my diary is mine, and they actually did respect that. But, um, and so the question was about humility, but also this question of communing. Um, actually I think that, um, that writing about the people I've written about has helped me commune with living people better. Ah, it's given me, ah, you know, sort of through the scholarly understanding of human motivation and strength and frailty, I like to think that I've developed a deeper appreciation for those qualities in the people I actually know. And I think that – I thank heavens that I got to become a biographer because I think it's made me, you know, perhaps a slightly more emotionally porous person and better able to absorb the, um, the feelings and ideas and hopes and thoughts of the people around me.

Chernow: I think that a biographer has to be careful to avoid a certain kind of vanity because you're writing about this figure, you know, and that you're spending more time, as John was saying, with this figure than any friend or family member. You have to avoid the temptation of imagining that you're kind of hobnobbing with these people (laughter) like you're suddenly on their level, because you're not. They wouldn't be worth writing about if you were on their level. The whole point is, um, that they're, you know, so much greater and more interesting than

you could ever be. I find that with all the books I've had a special meaning. I mean, one that, uh, – this was my most recent, is on my mind. When I was writing George Washington, my wife of 27 years died and in that state of mourning, um, I found that there was something about Washington's strength and perseverance that was an inspiration to me. Yeah, so I think that each of the books has a meaning. But I think also, just one other thing, because I know Philip has done such an extraordinary job with his Center for Transformative Lives, and I think that, you know, the basic idea of the Center is these inspirational lives, um, and they are. But I think that we read biography for two reasons, or we should read biography for two reasons. One is inspirational stories. The other is cautionary tales. Um, they're not always people to emulate. Um, they all have flaws, you know; there are kinds of warning signs in all of these stories that I think that we should take heed. Because I find, sometimes I find, readers in terms of reacting to something that I've written, they'll actually seem disappointed by my discussion of flaws, uh, in the person, and they'll actually evaluate the book by, you know, how wonderful or flawless this character is or isn't and I think that that's wrong, and I think that the, uh, you know, the purpose of biography in terms of the cautionary tale is arguably as important as that of the inspirational story.

Schiff: And I think the cautionary tale sometimes makes for the better book, too. Because, it's like the airplane crash has made for better flying in my first book. I think there is something of the extended *séance* about it, though, no matter what we all want to admit or not. I mean, I think you do things for your subject that you might not even do for your children. Um, and you go to the places that they went and you read the books they read, and you drink their favorite drinks and you try to learn their favorite sports and you may want to learn their languages. I mean, I do think there is a certain amount of crawling into the skin, which I kind of love, the burrowing so far as it's possible. It isn't quite so possible with a Hellenistic queen, to burrow into the skin of the subject. But I think you can only take it so far, and at the risk of revealing something I shouldn't reveal, I remember with my first book once, I had a dream where Saint-Exupéry came to me and said, "I won't reveal myself to you unless you spend more time with your children!" (laughter).

Atlas: Anne?

Anne Heller: Uh, I have a related question, and that is this. There are figures who command multiple biographies, sometimes dozens of them. And then there are figures that, once a biography has been written, that's pretty much it, that's enough. There might be, you know, sidelights or low lights to be revealed, but what is it that makes for a character – a figure who biographers have to come back to, and why do they come back to those characters? Is it because the current moment demands some new revelation about that character? Is it because the fig-

ure somehow speaks to the biographer or to the time? What makes for a great biographical figure?

Matteson: Well, I think, unfortunately, one of the things that determines the number of biographies written about an individual is just how many people in the street recognize the name. And, uh, you know, just commercially it's more sensible to try to say something about Abraham Lincoln than it is to say about José Martí. And, you know, José Martí could use a really, really good biography, I'm told. But – and I seem to recall that somebody is working on one. But, um, I think it's important to try to resist the pressures of the marketplace, and I would be terribly surprised if anybody up here or anybody in this room wrote about someone just because they're popular and they can stand to have dozens of biographies on them. I hope that one chooses one's topic, one's subject out of something very deeply internal and a desire to understand the experiences and struggles of a particular individual because that person somehow just matters *to you*. And if you get a good contract for that book fantastic, if it sells fabulously, wonderful, if you get a couple prizes, great, but I'll tell you something very interesting, and that goes back to when I had just finished writing *Eden's Outcasts*, it had actually come out and was starting to get some reviews, and *Publishers Weekly* came out with a review that was really kind of skunky. And I was angry, practically, if we had had a cat, I – no, I would never abuse an animal, but would be kicking it around the apartment just in disgust, and my daughter who was then thirteen sat me down and she said, "Dad, you did not write your book so that *Publishers Weekly* would like it. You wrote it because you had something to say that no one else was ever going to say if you didn't say it." And it's the best advice I've ever had as a writer, and I treasure it to this day.

Chernow: Now, we haven't talked just about the choice of subject which is far and away the most important choice that a biographer makes. I always say whenever I speak to writing students, I say it's a little bit like marriage. Choose the right person and nothing can go wrong; you choose the wrong person and nothing can go right. You know, so much flows out of that, uh, one decision. I mean, I think that, you know, you decide to write a biography of someone either because you, um, feel that you can create a fresh portrait or because you have fresh, uh, sources of information about the person. But another dimension that I've always looked for in biography is I want this person to represent some big movement or trend or phenomenon in American life, since I've written mostly American history. And I've been lucky in terms of having people who did represent something. Um, I never wanted to just write a colorful yarn about someone. I find that very often, you know, after doing a, a speech or a signing, someone will come up and say, Mr. Chernow, I have your next book, and they will tell me a story that is the most

astounding story I have ever heard in my life about anyone, and they can see I'm just kind of sitting there dazzled by this tale, and so they said, is that going to be your next book, and I say no (laughter). And they say, why not, you're saying this is the most unbelievable story you've ever heard. And I said, well, I'm not clear what the meaning of this story is, you know. It would be tremendously entertaining to write and, I'm sure, tremendously entertaining to read, but it doesn't have that extra dimension. I think to answer your question, I think when you look at these figures, where there have been many, many books written about them, it was because those lives added up to something much more than an interesting life – that it was a creation of something in the society that was going on that they were a central part of.

Schiff: David Herbert Donald once said something to me as well when I said something about there being no more Lincoln materials and he said, there are never any new materials; there are only new questions. And I think there are people we just come back to. I mean, I don't know how many Washingtons have been done since –

Chernow: Well, I mean, you know, uh –

Schiff: There are more Cleopatras.

Chernow: There were nine hundred biographies of Washington when I perpetrated number nine-oh-one, but I'll tell you an interesting story just apropos of, uh, Lincoln. I remember years back when I was doing the Rockefeller book, I was working in the University of Chicago library, and on the ground floor was a beautiful glass-enclosed room full of books. And I said to one of the librarians, I said, "What's in that room?" And she said, "Oh, we bought a very famous collection of someone who collected books either exclusively about Lincoln, or in which Lincoln figured prominently in the book." So, I said, out of curiosity, "How many books are in that room?" and she said, "Forty-five thousand" (laughter).

Atlas: So, um, Philip, now, do we have time for a question or two?

Kunhardt: We do. We should go to our reception at, uh, by 7:30, so –

Atlas: Okay.

Kunhardt: We have ten minutes, and I'll dismiss us after that.

Atlas: Oh, good, okay.

Matteson: Jim, is it appropriate if panel members get to ask questions of other panel members? I know that's a terrible usurpation, but . . .

Atlas: Oh, no, that's okay. I have other things to do, um, that's great. Why should I do all the work? Okay, so we don't have one of those people who run around

with the microphone and put it in your face. So you have to – Oh, we don't have, so project, and I will repeat the question. Yes, I know what to do. Yes?

[A question was asked regarding biographies with myths embedded in them and the use of “official” documents]

Schiff: Your point well taken, and I know what it's like to have to deal with myth. I would say about official archives only this: there's an enormous amount in the State Department archive, there's an enormous file on Saint-Exupéry, who spent the war years in New York as a foreign national. Almost everything in that file is wrong. Um, so, it's written by a bunch of, you know, 22-year-olds who were just out of Harvard and were working for the CIA and didn't really understand anything whatsoever about European politics or about the fall of France and pretty much everything they wrote is completely off base. So you can read him, you can read Saint-Exupéry as being part of any number of military – of political organizations that he was not part of. Um, and I think that's true of any number of – I mean, when Franklin's living in France, there are two sets of newspapers. There's the official French press, and there's the unofficial French press. Everything written for the official French press is propaganda. It's wrong. So, again, it's – what I'm saying is, you take the documentation, you know, for what it's worth as well as the myths and obviously some things more so. We all have said we've tended to doubt diaries to some extent. Personal correspondence is probably less so. I just think a certain amount of skepticism is um, a good sort of marching tool.

Chernow: No, I mean I've written about these very, very well-documented lives, and, um, with Hamilton there were thirty-two thick volumes; Grant, thirty-two thick volumes. In the case of Washington, almost seventy of a projected ninety-plus volumes. Just a couple of things, you know, about that: These are such great scholarly feats, the creation of these, um, new editions of papers. Some of them take up to forty or fifty years to do. Unfortunately what has happened is that I think the creation of these elaborate new editions, which are so marvelous, they're just feasts of scholarship. In the case of Washington, it was about – I forget – it was 125–150,000 documents, so we know much more about George Washington than Martha knew, I mean we have that much information. I think unfortunately what's happened is, in a curious way, they've acted as a deterrent, because people who want to do, you know, an authoritative biography of these figures look at the shelf and they say, oh, for starters I have to go through all, you know, seventy volumes of Washington or thirty-two volumes of Grant, and frankly most people don't have the time or maybe the stamina or inclination to, um, uh, to do it. So it's been wonderful, but also I think something of a deterrent, just in terms, I think, of swamping people. But you mention the myths, because this is something that we've all had to deal with, and I think it's very humbling if you're a biogra-

pher, um, the persistence of myth. Because we feel that our job is to, almost like, scrape away these barnacles, these myths that cling to the, to the subject's lives, but we all find that what happens is that we scrape away the myths and the myths go on because they appeal to someone. I mean, I remember when I was going around, you know, doing publicity about George Washington, I would start out by saying to the audience that, for most of them, everything that they knew about George Washington was a myth, you know. The cherry tree was a myth, the fact that he wore a wig was a myth, the fact that he was six-foot-three was a myth, and I could see in the audience this kind of growing panic in the audience (laughter) that, oh my God, you mean, I really don't know anything about, you know, the father of the country. And that is true: almost everything they knew was myth, but, I mean, the three myths that I just mentioned, you know, have been debunked by many biographers before I came along, but we all seem rather powerless to touch them because they appeal to some psychological need in people, so it's very sobering.

Matteson: In *Moby Dick*, Melville's narrator Ishmael makes a plea for time, strength, cash, and patience. And I think to be the perfect biographer you'd have to have infinite quantities of all four. You'd really almost have to be a god to have all of the knowledge and all of the time and all of the resources to do as thorough a job as you would love to do. And what then happens since you don't have infinite resources or infinite time and you have an editor breathing down your neck wanting your next chapters is that there is, there's a temptation to fall back on other secondary material and to crib maybe a little bit off what previous biographers have done so you don't have to reinvent the wheel all the time. But, invariably, the attempt to reinvent the wheel is preferable and more rewarding, because it gets you to the actual documents. I have an article, actually this month in *New England Quarterly* about a soldier whom Louisa May Alcott tended to when she was a nurse in the Civil War, um, who she describes in her journal, very often reprinted, as a thirty-year-old Virginia blacksmith. Um, by the utterest happenstance I was able to find out that, after I wrote this in my biography, after Madeleine Stern wrote it in her biography, every Alcott biographer has called this guy a thirty-year-old Virginia blacksmith. He was 21 and he was from Pennsylvania (laughter). And I have an article now in *New England Quarterly* correcting that problem – that everyone's just gotten in line and said the same thing. Uh, and, and so it goes to show what? That constantly new information is going to bubble to the surface, that every time you try to cut a corner you do so at your own risk, although it's almost impossible not to, simply because we live in a world of limited time and resources. Um, as far as myth goes, um, I think it's not a terrible thing to, to print the myth but just make sure that you have made it clear that it is, right.

There's this wonderful story that Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's son, told about Louisa May Alcott and how she found out that *Little Women* was a hit. And it's this thing where she goes to the publisher and there are all these boxes sitting around. She doesn't even know what they are. She wants her manuscript back, so she goes to him. She says, "I want my manuscript back." "You're Miss Alcott? Why, all of these boxes contain 'You've outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.'" He jumps over his desk and hugs her. None of it ever happened; it couldn't possibly have happened. And yet it's such a great story that, you know, I put it in Julian Hawthorne says this, it can't possibly be true, but it's so much fun. Here it is. So, so, uh, yeah, we're also, to a degree, in the entertainment business, but not to the extent that we would ever, you know, intentionally falsify or make anything up or perpetuate a myth that we knew to be a myth, you know, we do have ethics of some kind, um, throat-constricting emotions notwithstanding.

[The panelists were asked which of their subjects changed them most and how.]

Matteson: Okay, well, I think I've already answered that, and it's the Alcotts, and it's because it just showed me a complete, different dimension of family and parenthood and understanding of, of the people dearest to me. Uh. And it was a life-changing experience. I could not have written the book if I hadn't had my daughter, and I would not be the same person to my daughter, nor she to me if I had not written the book. So that's for me, it's easy to answer.

Schiff: I think for me it's probably Franklin, interestingly. First of all, it cured me from ever wanting to research a book in France ever again (laughter). So that was helpful and saved me a lot of money, but the interesting thing with Franklin, and I think this goes to Anne's question about why we go back to certain subjects again and again. There's almost nothing you can say about Franklin which you can't also contradict. And, I mean, this is a man who, you know, founds a fire brigade, but also an insurance company. I mean, everything about him, there's a counter statement to. And, you know, again the verbosity but he's incredibly taciturn. And it taught me a lot about nuance in life and about – and nuance in people and the many-sidedness of Franklin, which is I think utterly and always going to interest us and pull us back to him, because it had been a huge lesson for me as a biographer but also as a human being. Not that I wasn't already slightly nuanced.

Atlas: Don't hand that to me.

Schiff: I'm sorry, Did you have something to say?

Atlas: No, I never have anything to say.

Chernow: I think for me, um, Hamilton, although Hamilton was also a humbling experience because, um, I spent five years working on Hamilton, and I remember

before I started the book, I thought I was smart, I thought I was a good writer, I thought I was a fast writer and then suddenly, you know, I'm in the company of genius every day for five years, and I began to feel, oh my god, compared to this guy, I'm, you know, kind of a tongue-tied, dithering idiot, you know, Wonder Boy is dashing off all these brilliant speeches and essays and books. Um, I think that, kind of, when you're in the company of a great mind, it's kind of like you're breathing this, this oxygen. It's very stimulating, it's sort of very clarifying. You feel that your own mind is, you know, temporarily working at a higher level. I think that the effect wore off after a while, you know, (laughter) and I kind of went back to being this more ordinary character but I can remember when I was working on the book, I felt that I had this kind of heady sense that I was up there in Hamilton's world.

Atlas: So I think we have time for just one more.

[The panelists were asked whether they had read an autobiography that was so truthful and comprehensive that it rendered biography superfluous.]

Matteson: Um, the one that maybe comes closest for me is Katherine Graham's, but, um, it's not necessarily even my favorite autobiography. My favorite autobiography is *The Education of Henry Adams*, and – but he leaves gaps all over the place. He leaves a twenty-year gap that – you know, the time he was married. And so, yeah, I love Katherine Graham's because it's so honest and so revelatory and so seemingly, at least, candid about, um, you know, the suicide of her husband and her having to take over *The Washington Post* and so forth, but, um, I – my credo is that there's always something more to be done and more to be said.

Schiff: I guess I would say that the more artful the autobiography, the more I assume it's art, and therefore it invites biography. I'm thinking of *Speak, Memory* or *Cab at the Door*. I mean the more beautifully done it is, the more elusive is its author. I mean, there is a sort of strip tease to it, and that much isn't stripped off. But in answer to your question something than which you can then do no better as a biographer, I would give you this. In Ethel Merman's [auto]biography, there's a chapter entitled "My marriage to Ernest Borgnine." And there are two blank pages afterwards (laughter).

Atlas: Do you have one, Ron? Can you up the tone here a little bit? We have Katherine Graham, but Ethel Merman? ...

Chernow: I never thought, Stacy – Thank you for mentioning Ethel Merman. You know – Well, an autobiography I always loved, such that it never dawned on me to want to read a biography of him was the *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, which I guess that I read, you know, at a very impressionable age, at a time when I was trying to feed my own mind with knowledge. And again, we were

talking about cautionary tales, you know, there was definitely a warning sign of what happens if you try to over-intellectualize your life.

Atlas: So, well, I would like to have the last word, because all I've done is listen to these people, and I, and with the platform and everything, Philip and I did it all. And then there's – one of my favorite quotes is from Keats, um, the idea of negative capability that he describes in a letter to his brother: "When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." So I know I've given this genre of ours a tough time and made you all defend it, but obviously we've all devoted our lives to this biography, and we all love it as a form, and we approach it with skepticism but also with trust, and you are three wonderful exemplars of this. So, thank you for coming tonight.

Ronald Chernow is an American writer, journalist, popular historian, and biographer. He has written award-winning biographies of historical figures from the world of business, finance, and American politics. He won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Biography and the 2011 American History Book Prize for his 2010 book *Washington: A Life*. He is also the recipient of the National Book Award for Nonfiction for his 1990 book *The House of Morgan: An American Banking Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance*. His biographies of Alexander Hamilton (2004) and John D. Rockefeller (1998) were both nominated for National Book Critics Circle Awards, while the former served as the inspiration for the popular *Hamilton* musical, for which Chernow worked as a historical consultant. Another book, *The Warburgs: The Twentieth-Century Odyssey of a Remarkable Jewish Family*, was honored with the 1993 George S. Eccles Prize for Excellence in Economic Writing. As a freelance journalist, he has written over sixty articles in national publications (based on Wikipedia).

John T. Matteson is Distinguished Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the City University of New York. He was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. His 2012 book *The Lives of Margaret Fuller* received the Ann. M. Sperber Prize for best biography of a journalist. His most recent book is *A Worse Place Than Hell: How the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg Changed a Nation*.

Stacy Madeleine Schiff is an American former editor, essayist, and author of five biographies; her biography of Vera Nabokov, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize in biography. Schiff has also written biographies of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Benjamin Franklin, ancient Egyptian queen Cleopatra, and the important figures and events of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692–93 in colonial Massachusetts. Her essays and articles have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Washington Post*.

James Robert Atlas (March 22, 1949 – September 4, 2019) was a writer, especially of biographies, as well as a publisher. He was the president of Atlas & Company, and founding editor of the Penguin Lives Series. At Oxford, he studied under the biographer Richard Ellmann. Atlas was a contributor to *The New Yorker* and an editor at *The New York Times Magazine*. He edited volumes of poetry and wrote several novels and two biographies. Atlas's work

appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's*, *New York Magazine*, and *Huffington Post*.

Philip Kunhardt is the Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Transformative Lives at NYU. The Center looks at “exemplary individuals whose dedication, genius, and moral vision helped shape the course of human events,” in the context of their times and the circles in which they moved. Kunhardt is Distinguished Scholar in Residence in the Humanities at New York University and teacher of history and biography in the College of Arts and Science. He has co-authored five books, and written and co-produced numerous documentaries for PBS, ABC, HBO, Discovery and other networks.

