



# The BIOGRAPHER'S *craft*

A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER  
FOR WRITERS & READERS OF BIOGRAPHY

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## 2011 Compleat Biographer Conference Hailed As a Success by Attendees

After months of preparation by dozens of volunteers, the 2011 Compleat Biographer Conference is now history. But it goes into the books as even more successful than the 2010 inaugural conference in Boston.

“It was an extremely useful, information-packed conference,” said Stephen M. Weissman, author of *Chaplin: A Life*.

The number of attendees at this year’s conference was 145 percent higher than last year’s. The schedule was also greatly expanded, with a full day of preconference research workshops at the Library of Congress and the National Archives and a pre-opening hours tour of the Smithsonian’s exhibit on Abraham Lincoln. The conference itself included twice as many panels.

Attendees came from as far away as Australia, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. Among those making the longest trek was Jane Sandilands, a biographer who lives in Bermagui, a small commercial fishing village on the far south coast of New South Wales, where she has a tree-house office in a spotted-gum forest.

The conference “was wonderfully well organized—it ran to time and had good panels and good catering (I write as someone who organized a leadership program for four years, so know how much organization goes into something that in the end appears so simple),” Sandilands said. “I learnt a lot—not just about biography, but about America—a real broadening and



Thomas Mann, reference librarian in the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress and author of *The Oxford Guide to Library Research*, spoke to a packed house during the preconference research workshops.

**Coming Next  
Month:**

**The Annual  
Roundup of  
Fall  
Biographies**

*Attention authors and publicists: be sure to send us your announcements.*



**From the  
Editor**

*The extensive staff, who normally spends hours assembling each month’s “From the Editor,” has been given the month off to recover from the annual conference. Watch this space next month, when we will return with yet another exciting installment of “From the Editor.”*

educative experience. And I felt absolutely delighted and privileged to go to the Smithsonian on that Friday morning and hear the curator talk about Abraham Lincoln.”

Robert Caro delivered the conference’s keynote address, at a luncheon on Saturday, after BIO president Nigel Hamilton presented him with the 2011 BIO Award, given each year to a person for “contributions to advancing the art and craft of biography.”

“The highlight of Saturday for most people was undoubtedly the luncheon,” reported Dona Munker, TBC’s New York correspondent, in a posting. “He’s said it before, but nobody says it better, in or out of print.”

A video of Caro’s speech will be available for viewing on YouTube and on BIO’s website soon.

The night before the conference, Washington biographer Kitty Kelley opened her Georgetown home for a reception and fundraiser. The money from ticket sales to the event will go to fund scholarships and possibly a prize in memory of Hazel Rowley, a founding member of BIO who passed away earlier this year.

Here are links to the full program and several news stories and postings about the conference:

- [Program](#)
- [Wall Street Journal](#)
- [Houston Press](#)
- [first person plural](#)
- [Nieman Storyboard](#)

## The Power of Place: BIO Award–Winner Robert Caro on Setting, at the 2011 Conference



BIO president Nigel Hamilton (right) presents Robert Caro with the 2011 BIO Award for the author’s contributions to “advancing the art and craft of biography.”

biography but for the standing of biography itself in our society.”

**By Andrea Pitzer**

“Show, don’t tell” is a mantra of narrative writers everywhere, but even the most useful adage can lose meaning with repetition. Before a lunchtime audience of writers at the second annual Compleat Biographer Conference on Saturday, legendary biographer Robert Caro reinvigorated the concept.

How did he do it? With a vivid evocation of the way that place can reveal motivation and illuminate character —making direct explanation completely unnecessary.

In the National Press Club ballroom, BIO president Nigel Hamilton presented Caro with the 2011 BIO Award. Hamilton noted that the prize honored what Caro has done “not just for the craft of

## Sold to Publishers

Listed here are book proposals that have recently sold to publishing houses. The information is obtained from [Publishers Marketplace](#) and other sources.

Donald Scott, authorized biography of the UC Berkeley English professor, naturalist, historian, and toponymist George R. Stewart, to McFarland

Jonathan Reggio, *Hanging Man: Ai Weiwei*, to Farrar, Straus and to Ambo Anthosi in the Netherlands and to Il Saggiatore in Italy

Peter Caddick-Adams, *Monty and Rommel: Parallel Lives*, to Overlook

Cassandra Langer, *All or Nothing: The Life, Loves, and Art of Romaine Brooks*, to Magnus

Anthony Colombo, with Don Capria, *My Way: The Biography of Joseph Colombo*, to Wiley

R. B. Scott, *Mitt Romney: A Biography*, to Lyons Press

Alexander Pantsov and Steven Levine, *Mao: His Life and Times*, to Simon & Schuster and Fischer in Germany

Lesley-Ann Jones, *Freddie Mercury*, to Touchstone

Diane Kiesel, *She Can Bring Us Home: The Life of Dorothy Boulding Ferebee*, to Potomac

Brett Cogburn, *Fill Your Hands: The Life and Times of the Real*

Caro thanked his wife, Ina, as the sole member of his research team during the many decades of his career. Then he quickly got down to a lesson on craft. Setting, he suggested, plays a vital role in timeless fiction:

“The greatest of books are books with places you can see in your mind’s eye,” he said, “The deck of the *Pequod* while the barefoot sailors are hauling the parts of the whale aboard to melt them down for oil. The battlefield at Borodino as Napoleon, looking down from a hill on his mighty imperial guard, has to decide whether to wave them forward into battle. Miss Havisham’s room, the room in which she was to have been married, the room in which she received the letter that told her that the man she loved wasn’t coming, the room with the clock stopped forever at the minute she got the news, the room with the wreckage of the wedding feast that has never been taken away.”

Yet, Caro noted, few reviews point to the power of place in nonfiction. The value of place, widely acknowledged as a key component of literature, he suggested, is often overlooked in biography.

“If the place is important enough in the character’s life,” he said, “if on the most basic level he spent enough time in it, was brought up in it or presided over it, like the Senate, or exercised power in it, like the White House; if the place, the setting, played a crucial role in shaping the character’s feelings, drives, motivations, insecurities, then by describing the place well enough, the author will have succeeded in bringing the reader closer to an understanding of the character without giving him a lecture, will have made the reader therefore not just understand but empathize with a character, will have made the readers’ understanding more vivid, deeper than any lecture could.”

Caro has won the Pulitzer Prize twice, first in 1975 for his biography of Robert Moses and again in 2003 for the third installment of his four-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson (the final installment is still in process). To illustrate his point about the power of setting, Caro talked about his research on two key places in Lyndon Johnson’s life.

Johnson grew up outside Johnson City, Texas, and when Caro first started mining his subject’s life, he knew there was something he was missing about the place. To get a better understanding, he decided to move there. He took a sleeping bag into the hills to spend an entire day alone, to sleep alone and wake up alone. What he came to realize was how empty and inhuman the landscape was.

During interviews with area residents, women would pull out the wooden yokes they had used to carry gallon after gallon of water from the well to their homes—a task that wore them out and warped their spines. Over time, Caro began to see just what it would mean to deliver electricity, to “bring the lights,” to that isolated corner of the world. And he developed a different understanding of Johnson’s first congressional campaign slogan, which urged voters to vote for him “so you won’t look like your mother did.”

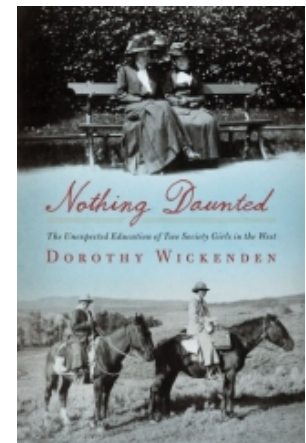
Caro contrasted the place Johnson grew up with Capitol Hill, where Johnson came into his own and made his career. As with the Texas hill country, Caro felt that something was missing from his understanding of the place. He talked with one of Johnson’s early coworkers, who had been an administrative aide on Capitol Hill with him when he was new to Washington. She described watching Johnson come across the length of the Capitol on his way to work in the morning and mentioned that he always seemed to be running. At first she had thought it was because he didn’t have a warm winter coat, but she later noticed that he did it even in summer weather.

*Rooster Cogburn*, to Kensington

Susan Schwartz, *Into the Unknown: The Remarkable Life of Hans Kraus*, to Skyhorse

Larry Gibson, *Young Thurgood: Early Years of a Great Lawyer and Supreme Court Justice*, to Prometheus

## IN STORES



*Nothing Daunted: The Unexpected Education of Two Society Girls in the West*  
by Dorothy Wickenden  
(Scribner)  
**PW Review**

*Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais*  
by Suzanne Fagence Cooper  
(St. Martin's)  
**PW Review**

*Captain Cook: Master of the Seas*  
by Frank McLynn  
(Yale)

*The Story of Charlotte’s Web: E. B. White’s Eccentric Life in Nature and the Birth of an American Classic*  
by Michael Sims

Caro wondered about the draw of the place for Johnson and spent time on the Capitol grounds, taking the walk that Johnson took on his way to work again and again, still looking for something. Then he recalled that Johnson and his coworker were from farm country and headed to work early in the morning. So he tried again at a much earlier hour and found that just after dawn the east side of the Capitol building was lit up and glowing.

To show how he made use of the discovery, he read the audience a passage from his book, describing Johnson coming to work:

When Lyndon Johnson first came to Washington, he lived in the basement of a shabby little hotel, in a tiny cubicle across whose ceiling ran bare steam pipes. Its slit of a window stared out across a narrow alley at the weather-stained red brick wall of another hotel. Leaving his room early in the morning, Lyndon would turn left down the alley, walking between the red brick walls of other shabby hotels, but when he turned the corner at the end of that alley, suddenly before him at the top of a long gentle hill would be not brick but marble, a great shadowy mass of marble. Marble columns and marble arches and marble parapets, and a long marble balustrade high against the sky. Veering along a path to the left, he would come up Capitol Hill and around the corner of the Capitol, and the marble of the eastern façade, already caught by the early morning sun, would be a gleaming, brilliant, almost dazzling white.

A new line of columns, towering columns, marble for magnificence and Corinthian for grace, stretched ahead of him, a line of columns so long that columns seemed to be marching endlessly before him, the long friezes above them crammed with heroic figures. And columns loomed not only before him but above him. There were columns atop columns, columns in the sky. For the huge dome that rose above the Capitol was circled by columns not only in its first mighty upward thrust, where it was rimmed by thirty-six great pillars for the thirty-six states that the Union had comprised when it was built, it was circled by columns also high above, 300 feet above the ground, where just below the statue of Freedom, a circle of thirteen smaller, more slender shafts for the thirteen original states created a structure that looked like a little temple in the sky, adding a grace note to a building as majestic and imposing as the power of the sovereign state that it has been designed to symbolize. And as Lyndon Johnson came up Capitol Hill in the morning, he would be running.

“Of course he was running,” Caro said, adding that he didn’t know if he had succeeded at what he was trying to do but still believed that working hard to convey a true sense of place could illuminate something profound about a subject. He hoped, he said, to explain what Johnson was striving for “not by lecturing the reader, but by showing him what Lyndon Johnson saw.”

**Andrea Pitzer** is the founder of Nieman Storyboard and has been an editor with the Nieman Foundation’s narrative program since 2007. She has presented on the future of storytelling journalism and literary narratives at conferences in the **United States** and **abroad**. Her writing has appeared in *USA Today* and the *Washington Post Magazine*, and her prior lives include work as a poet, a painter, a music critic, and an editor of a violence research bulletin. She is currently writing a book about Vladimir Nabokov and his century.

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(Walker & Co)

*Bolívar:*

*The Liberator of Latin America*

by Robert Harvey

(Skyhorse)

**PW Review**

*Wonder Girl:*

*The Magnificent Sporting Life of*

*Babe Didrikson Zaharias*

by Don Van Natta Jr.

(Little, Brown)

**PW Review**

*What a Wonderful World:*

*The Magic of Louis Armstrong’s*

*Later Years*

by Ricky Riccardi

(Pantheon)

**PW Review**

*Napoleon and the Rebel:*

*A Story of Brotherhood, Passion,*

*and Power*

by Marcello Simonetta and

Noga Arikha

(Palgrave MacMillan)

**PW Review**

*The Man in the Rockefeller Suit:*

*The Astonishing Rise and*

*Spectacular Fall of a Serial*

*Imposter*

by Mark Seal

(Viking)

**PW Review**

*Ethan Allen: His Life and Times*

by Willard Sterne Randall

(W. W. Norton)

**PW review**

*The Natural Mystics:*

*Marley, Tosh, and Wailer*

by Colin Grant

(W. W. Norton)

**PW Review**

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## IN PAPER

*Pretty Boy:*

*The Life and Times of*

*Charles Arthur Floyd*



## Booklist Makes Its Annual Selection of 10 Best Adult and 10 Best YA Biographies

Booklist's annual selection of the 10 best biographies for adults and the 10 best for young readers appears in its June issue.

This year's picks for the 10 best adult biographies is a diverse group and affirms the quality of the genre, according to the adult-book editor of the venerable library book review magazine

"Since our previous Spotlight on Biography," Brad Hooper said, "the past 12 months have shown us that to ever think that the art of biography is slipping or sliding, even temporarily, is ridiculous."

Biographies on this year's list are:

- *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*, by Phoebe Hoban (St. Martin's);
- *Colonel Roosevelt*, by Edmund Morris (Random House);
- *A Complicated Man: The Life of Bill Clinton as Told by Those Who Know Him*, by Michael Takiff (Yale);
- *Edward Kennedy: An Intimate Biography*, by Burton Hersh (Counterpoint);
- *Fab: The Life of Paul McCartney*, by Howard Sounes (Da Capo);
- *Galileo*, by John Heilbron (Oxford);
- *How to Live: Or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, by Sarah Bakewell (Other Press);
- *Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter*, by Patricia Albers (Knopf);
- *Washington: A Life*, by Ron Chernow (Penguin); and
- *Will Eisner: A Dreamer's Life in Comics*, by Michael Schumacher (Bloomsbury).

Biographies appearing on the list of 10 best for young readers are:

- *Benjamin O. Davis Jr.: Air Force General & Tuskegee Airmen Leader*, by Sari Earl (ABDO);
- *Candy Bomber: The Story of the Berlin Airlift's Chocolate Pilot*, by Michael O. Tunnell (Charlesbridge);
- *Frederick Douglass: A Noble Life*, by David A. Adler (Holiday);
- *Hudson*, by Janice Weaver (Tundra);
- *Jane Austen: A Life Revealed*, by Catherine Reef (Clarion);



Phoebe Hoban's biography was selected as one of the 10 best this year by Booklist.

**"The past 12 months have shown us that to ever think that the art of biography is slipping or sliding, even temporarily, is ridiculous."**  
—Brad Hooper

by Michael Wallis  
(W. W. Norton)

*The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness*

by Oren Harman  
(W. W. Norton)

*The Strangest Man: The Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Mystic of the Atom*

by Graham Farmelo  
(Basic books)

*Bob Marley: The Untold Story*

by Chris Salewicz  
(Faber & Faber)

### Best-Selling UK Biographies

The following is a list of the top best-selling biographies at the beginning of June in the United Kingdom, according to Amazon UK .

1. *William & Catherine: Their Lives, Their Wedding*, by Andrew Morton (Michael O'Mara Books)
2. *Jack Hobbs*, by Leo McKinstry (Yellow Jersey)
3. *Endgame: Bobby Fischer's Remarkable Rise and Fall from America's Brightest Prodigy to the Edge of Madness*, by Frank Brady (Constable)
4. *Colin Firth: The Biography*, by Alison Maloney (Michael O'Mara)
5. *The Man Who Invented the Daleks: The Strange Worlds of Terry Nation*, by Alwyn W. Turner (Aurum Press)
6. *And God Created Burton*,

- *Janis Joplin: Rise Up Singing*, by Ann Angel (Abrams/Amulet);
- *Lafayette and the American Revolution*, by Russell Freedman (Holiday);
- *A Nation's Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis*, by Matt de la Peña (Nelson);
- *Sir Charlie: Chaplin, The Funniest Man in the World*, by Sid Fleischman (Greenwillow); and
- *The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps*, by Jeanette Winter (Random/Schwartz & Wade).

## Ziegler Wins £5,000 Longford Prize for His Heath Biography



Philip Zeigler is the author of biographies of British rulers and notables.

This year's £5,000 Elizabeth Longford prize will be presented on June 14 to biographer Philip Ziegler for his biography of Edward Heath, who served as prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1970 to 1974.

The biography, which was authorized, was described as a "fully rounded, compelling, and ultimately moving portrait of a flawed but impressive personality" by judges of the prize.

The author, an octogenarian retired foreign service officer, has also written biographies of William IV, Lord Melbourne, Lady Diana Cooper, Lord Mountbatten, King Edward VIII, Harold Wilson, Rupert Hart-Davis, and Osbert Sitwell.

Members of the judging panel included Lady Antonia Fraser, Flora Fraser, David Gilmour, Munro Price, and Professor Roy Foster.

The prize is sponsored by Flora Fraser and Peter Soros in memory of biographer Elizabeth Longford and will be presented by Lady Antonia Fraser.

## Metaxas Honored at Christopher Awards

Biographer Eric Metaxas was among those honored at the 62nd Christopher Awards, given at a banquet in New York on May 19.

Metaxas's *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Thomas Nelson) earned yet another honor; that book has also been named Book of the Year by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, and the author won the 2011 Canterbury Medal, awarded by the Becket Fund for Religious Freedom.

Other Christopher-winning biographies include *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, by Charlene Smith and John Feister; *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*, by Laura Hillenbrand; and *Washington: A Life*, by Ron Chernow.

by Tom Rubython (Myrtle Press)

7. *James Joyce: A Biography*, by Gordon Bowker (W&N)

8. *Gustav Mahler*, by Jens Malte Fischer (Yale University Press)

9. *Sister Queens: Katherine of Aragon and Juana Queen of Castile*, by Julia Fox (W&N)

10. *The Unreliable Life of Harry the Valet: The Great Victorian Jewel Thief*, by Duncan Hamilton (Century)



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During Eric Metaxas's eclectic career, he has written for Veggie Tales, Chuck Colson, and the *New York Times*.

The Washington  
Independent Review  
of Books

*The Independent*, the newest voice in the community of readers and writers, is a website dedicated to book reviews and writing about the world of books. *The Independent* is a labor of love produced by dozens of writers and editors, mostly in the Washington, D.C., area, who are dismayed by the disappearance of book reviews and book review sections in the mainstream media.

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## 2011 Franklin Award—Winners for Biography



It's not the writing but the excellence in publishing that landed these biographers in the winners' circle. Each year the Independent Book Publishers Association presents Benjamin Franklin Awards to books judged to be best in editorial and design merit by top practitioners in each field.

This year's biography winner was *Beating a Dead Horse: The Life and Times of Jay Marshall*, written by Alexander "Sandy" Marshal and

published by Junto Publishing.

The finalists were *Errol and Olivia: Ego and Obsession in Golden Era Hollywood*, written by Robert Matzen and published by Paladin Communications; and *Vermont's Irish Rebel*, written by William L. McKone and published by Brewster River Press.

The trophies were awarded during a gala awards ceremony on the final evening of the Publishing University at Book Expo America, held in New York City this past month.

## Library of Congress Improves Its Chronicling America Website

The Library of Congress has given the Chronicling America website a new look and several new features. Searching and navigation have been

### The Biographer's Craft

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improved. The site now enables users to see the search tool at the top of every page, to navigate within search results, to limit searching to only front pages, and to view any newspaper in “full page” mode without any extra information around the page. Users can now also subscribe to weekly updates and recent addition notices or share any page on the site through email and sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Google.



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correspondents, [click here](#).

## BIO News & Notes



Alma Bond retired from a successful Manhattan practice as a psychoanalyst in 1991 to write full time in Key West, Florida.

**Alma H. Bond's** *Jackie O: On the Couch* is in stores. **Jonathan Eig** reviewed *Stan Musial: An American Life*, by George Vecsey, in the *New York Times Book Review*. **Andrew Morton** reflects on having the best job in the world [here](#). **Amy Schapiro** is **blogging** these days. **Stephen Weissman** is working on a multimedia edition of his Chaplin biography, complete with film clips, music, and photos, to be displayed on an iPad. “I think multimedia biographies like this will be the wave of the future,” reports Weissman. Advance reading copies of **Charles Bracelen Flood's** forthcoming *Grant's Final Victory* are circulating among reviewers. **Justin Martin's** *Genius of*

*Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* is out and was spotted for sale at the Compleat Biographer Conference. **Catherine Reef's** biography of Jane Austen is among the 10 best young adult biographies of the year, according to *Booklist*. Be sure to check out the “Sold to Publishers” listings this month: two BIO members, **Diane Kiesel** and **Cassandra Langer**, are among the authors who obtained contracts for biographies last month.



## BIO Discussion Forum



Each month the Forum editor poses a question or posts one from BIO members. The replies are posted on BIO's Forum Web page ([link below](#)).

**BIO's Discussion Forum will resume in July.**

Louise (Lucy)  
W. Knight  
serves as  
Forum editor.  
(Photo by  
Joseph G.  
Barabe.)

### Amanuensis

**Amanuensis:** A person whose employment is to write what another dictates, or to copy what another has written. Source: *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913).

One day last year, while working on a biography of the publisher Scofield Thayer, I opened a folder of papers related to his magazine *The Dial*. The folder contained undated letters from the poet E. E. Cummings to Thayer, early versions of a couple Cummings' poems and one poem by Cummings I couldn't remember ever seeing before. It was called "(tonite" and, until I came across it, it was unknown. [[Read more](#)]



--James Dempsey, *The Awl*

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