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Fiction, Nonfiction, and Biography: Ronald Reagan, Edmund Morris, and the Lives of Political Leaders

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Abstract. This article explores the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction in the biography of political leaders. Exemplifying this dividing line is the recent biography of former United States President Ronald Reagan by Edmund Morris.

A great deal of controversy has accompanied the publication of *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* by Edmund Morris. The controversy has centered on the biographer's use of fictional characters and segments of fictional plot as a vehicle to convey understanding of a nonfictional character and that character's life. Opponents of Morris's method claim that only nonfictional material belongs in a biography. Alas, these opponents assume a dividing line between fiction and nonfiction that is much too easily crossed.

First, only some of all information about the subject of a biography can be contained in that biography. The choosing between what to include and what to leave out necessitates that the resulting biography is at least partially fictional per se. Why is this? One presents a life of a political leader that is not and cannot be a complete life. The presentation of a life that is less than that is a fiction.

Second, information about the subject of a biography varies in the degree to which that information is embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. Usually, the biographer will choose which features of a political leader override contexts, interact with contexts, and are superseded by contexts. As well, the biographer chooses which of all possible features and contexts to include. This choosing is a product of combinations of reason, observation, and mindless compliance with other sources deemed by the biographer to be authoritative. This choosing necessitates that the biography will at least partially be fiction--not only because all information cannot be included and analyzed, but because reason, observation, and compliance with authorities all have well-analyzed, epistemological vulnerabilities.

Third, biographies not only have epistemological vulnerabilities but teleological ones as well. Most often, biographies are intended by their authors to "get at the truth." "Getting at the truth" is also a significant criterion by which critics evaluate biographies. Both intention and criterion assume that there is a truth at which to get. Part of such a truth seems founded on notions that the subject of a biography has and/or retains access to relevant phenomenologies and to knowledge of various causal factors impacting on one's life from the efficient through the mechanical--and that phenomenologies and knowledge capture the sense of the subject; the sense of others toward the subject from the point of view of the subject; and/or what caused the subject and others (toward the subject) to think, feel, and behave. Part seems founded on notions that others knowing or knowing of the subject have and/or retain access to similar phenomenologies and knowledge. Part seems founded on notions that the "truth to get at" is a prisoner of its own times and/or that there can be additional truth garnered from the times before the subject lives or after the subject passes away. And part seems founded on notions that the truth never changes, ever changes, and/or at times changes. All the above militate strongly for the social construction of social phenomenology and knowledge and towards the position that the presentation of biography as a truth is a fiction.

Fourth, even if the biographical truth were not a fiction, one might still employ fictional means to arrive at the nonfictional ends. Novels, stories, plays, dance, sculpture, and other products of the arts intended and evaluated in this manner. Here the controversy might become what kind of truth a biography is to provide--a sense of the person, the person's own sense, a record of what happened to and/or by the person, and so on.

It seems as if the controversy about the Morris biography of Reagan only comes down to Morris's employing fictional and nonfictional means of getting at some sort of nonfictional truth. But nonfictional truth is a fiction, while both nonfictional and fictional means can get at the truth. Could Dutch have said it any better himself? Only if he had the ability and motivation. (See Morris, E. (1999). *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*. Random House; Oatley, K. (1999). Why fiction may be twice as true as fact: Fiction as cognitive and emotional simulation. *Review of General Psychology*, 3, 101-117; Spence, D.P. (1996). Theories of the mind: Science or literature? *Psyke and Logos*, 17, 171-188; Stengers, I. (1992). *Les regimes de la verite* (The regimes of truth). *Psychanalyses*, 44, 9-28; Szajnberg, N.M. (1992). Psychoanalysis as an extension of the autobiographical genre: Poetry and truth, fiction and reality. *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 19, 375-387; Wooley, J.D. (1995). The fictional mind: Young children's understanding of imagination, pretense, and dreams. *Developmental Review*, 15, 172-211.) (Note. Clinical neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists might wish to ponder on whether President Reagan could have been characterized throughout much of his life with some variant of congenital or developmental prosopagnosia as well as or instead of an unusual sense of humor centered on the pretense of not recognizing people whom he might well be expected to recognize. Individuals with prosopagnosia find the task of recognizing other people just by looking at their faces extremely difficult. Thus, in order to recognize familiar people, they will rely on such features as the voice, hairstyle, and clothing items, or on contextual information. (Visit websites with access to relevant research at the University of California at Berkeley's Psychology Department and the Neurology Research Service at the Martinez VA Medical Center--e.g., <http://ls.berkeley.edu/dept/psychology/> and <http://www.ebire.org/neuroscience/index.html> respectively.)) (Keywords: Biography, Fiction, Morris, Nonfiction, Political Leaders, Prosopagnosia, Reagan.)