

Personae of Interest

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THOMAS BELLER GRAPPLES WITH ELUSIVE LITERARY ICON J. D. SALINGER.

Near the beginning of Pico Iyer's *The Man Within My Head*, an account of Graham Greene's imprint on his inner life, the peripatetic Iyer, on a bus in Bolivia, notices a woman stealing glances at him.

She was in her late thirties, I guessed, with many of her youthful dreams exhausted, but she hadn't given up on her earliest hopes entirely. She had applied some lipstick and blusher this morning and put on a cross that silvered her throat; she seemed to be trying to work out who I was as I sat in my row alone.

She turns out to be the guide he'd hired, and they spend the day together. There's something wistful in her manner, and later on, sitting close to Iyer on another bus, she puts her hand on his arm ("A local habit, I thought; but perhaps not only a local habit"). She seems to want something from him, sees in him, perhaps, an emblem of the freedom and mobility she'll never know. What he wants from her is a conduit to Greene's theme of foreigner-meets-local, replete with the traditional fantasies and misrecognitions: "My life was as hazy to her as hers might be to me; each of us could fill in the empty space with anything we chose."

Though not really—Iyer has a wife at home, Hiroko, he quickly tells us. The thud you hear is biographical reality shutting the door on that "anything we chose." Iyer may want to go where Greene has gone, but since he's going there under his own name, there's only so far he can go. All inchoate desires have to be the guide's alone.

The question on the table is this: What avenues are opened and which shut down when an author and a character share a name, as in the so-called "quest biography," a term that's been invented, as far as I can tell (it doesn't come up on Google), in the galley copy for Thomas Beller's *J. D. Salinger: The Escape Artist* (New Harvest, \$20), which likens it to Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*, another book "as much about the biographer as about the subject."

If there's a new genre on the literary landscape, then let's talk about the tenets of the form, and what a successful version looks like. The *Sheer Rage* comparison sets a tough bar, obviously, not least because it's so often labeled sui generis, though Dyer's book does share certain traits with Nicholson Baker's earlier *U and I*. Neither is actually very long on biography, for one thing. What they're long on is tormented selfhood—the writer's. Dyer skitters around the Western Hemisphere supposedly trying to get started on a study of Lawrence; Baker stays home, agonizing about the greatness of John Updike. At heart, they're both wrestling matches: younger authors vying for dominance with an iconic author and winning. How do they win? By making themselves more interesting characters than their subjects.

Dyer's a skeezy neurotic: whiny, petty, irritatingly indecisive. Baker's a grandiloquent goofball fretting about his literary reputation and his psoriasis (an affliction he's proud to share with Updike). What the two of them have in spades is shamelessness. Let me clarify: Their namesakes are afflicted by shame as anyone alive; but as writers they have none. They not only lack shame, they lack loyalty—they throw their namesakes under the bus for the sake of their books, inventing novel embarrassments and cringe-making episodes to subject them to. Baker happily tells us he's never masturbated "successfully" to a scene in Updike but finds useful material in Iris Murdoch; Dyer tries to masturbate on a nude beach while imagining his girlfriend pissing on him, but the sand is injuriously gritty, and then he remembers he's in public.

Is soul-baring a sine qua non for the quest-bio writer? Wrestling your subject into a naked headlock, then sobbing drunkenly on his shoulder about the misery of knowing he's a better writer than you? Not in the least. That is, no *actual* soul-baring is required—it doesn't matter whether the real Baker has utter equanimity about his literary reputation, or Dyer's a paragon of decisiveness. What matters, if you're planning on entering the story, is ruthlessness toward yourself as a character. Iyer's elegiac sentences are lovely to read; he ponders his lifelong sense of disconnection with eloquence, but he's also fatally loyal to himself, barring us entry to the dirty impoliteness of interior life.

By dirty, I don't mean that sexual indiscretions are required, by the way. Take Baker, whose dirtiness is way more shocking than dirty sex: It's dirty ambition that's his bared wart. The greatness of *U and I* is just how pained Baker is by Updike's talent. In fact, this *is* the deep structure of the quest bio, I



J. D. Salinger with Lillian Ross's son, Erik.

suspect. Grappling in the mud with another writer exposes the writer, at his most flawed and vulnerable, to himself.

On the grappling-exposing meter, if Baker and Dyer are at one end and Iyer's in the middle, Beller carves out a niche way on the other side. Now we've agreed that soul-baring is not de rigueur, but then, what have you got for us instead? Beller's answer is to hit the road. This is indeed the genre's prevailing trope: the pilgrimage to the place the subject may once have trod long ago. So Beller dutifully visits the summer camp Jerry Salinger attended at age eleven; he treks to Central Park in winter to soak up the Salinger-ish solitude. When he journeys to the Princeton library to read Salinger's manuscripts and letters, we get every detail: A misplaced shuttle-bus stop forces him to walk up a hill. He locates Salinger's Park Avenue apartment, visits, and imagines Zooey Glass in the tub.

Beller's often a great writer—I very much admire his fiction—but this is pro forma stuff. I get that Salinger's an elusive quarry, but so is Beller, ultimately. There are some nice passages in the final pages on his adolescence—a "fat, fatherless, fucked-up, angry, cowardly, lonely, socially awkward, needy, mother-attached, underachieving, wise-ass eighth-grader"—but we're still at quite a remove. And when

he tries to work the Salinger links—his father was from Vienna, like Salinger's; through the well-known principle of Jewish geography, Fritz, the older aunt of some Beller family friends, used to know Salinger's sister Doris, a buyer at Bloomingdale's—we're no closer.

I know Beller slightly, I should mention—we were at a writers' colony together a decade ago, and met once for coffee. He seemed like a nice guy, but I can't say that I know him much more deeply after reading *The Escape Artist*. The irony is that when he stops trying to be a character and plays the traditional critic, that's when the book hits its stride. He's fantastic at describing what reading Salinger *feels* like—the "alchemical mix of seduction, flattery, and the sense of mortal danger." And the kicker: "Writing had no business making you feel that way."

The pilgrimage that pays off best is to *New Yorker* fiction editor Roger Angell. Although Angell never edited Salinger and doesn't really have much to say about him, some enigma about Beller's own relation to Angell colors the scene—some hitch in Beller's fiction-publishing career at the *New Yorker* that he alludes to but doesn't want to go into. "I had been reluctant to communicate with him and send things in for so long"—out of either coyness or fear of disappointing, he adds cryptically. Angell was once Beller's own editor, though apparently not recently. "I had the occasion to be in his office now and then for a few years but then it stopped."

Disappointment, resentment, a little self-contempt—*now* he starts feeling like a genuine self. Also at a few interstices when a not-so-nice guy emerges. I'm referring to the kvetchy moralizer who seems to pop up whenever gabby women writers are in the vicinity, like Joyce Maynard, who wrote the controversial memoir about her nine-month relationship with Salinger (she was nineteen, he was fifty-three). Does Beller pounce on her! She's "one of those writers whose talent is imbued with a blind spot that both negates the talent and may, in some ways, be its source." Worse, her writing is embarrassingly two-dimensional. No doubt it is, though curiously he says nearly the same things about Salinger's daughter Margaret, who also wrote a memoir about him and is also "oblivious to her own motives." And a flat writer. But who really gets it from Beller is the amorously iconoclastic *New Yorker* writer Lillian Ross, who had a decades-long affair with the long-married *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, and wrote an indiscreet book about their relationship after he died. Call the morality squad! No, not on Shawn—on Ross. "I want to say that her abilities of self-perception are strangely limited, but that is just too much of an understatement," Beller fumes. Her book "reads like it was written in a trance."

So many women, so many blind spots! Here's where Beller *does* start to resemble the cranky, uncensored Dyer of *Out of Sheer Rage*, who'd be nothing without his multiple, often ludicrous, usually inexplicable aversions.

If the quest-bio genre requires a certain absence of self-loyalty from the author, it must be said that writing as oneself can often be more of a constraint than a leeway. To be a compelling character requires the ability to split yourself up, then sell the other guy out. Maybe this is the place to mention Beller's author photo, which shows him holding a small, blanket-wrapped child. I bring it up because it proclaims an identity to the world: family man, good guy. These may be desirable qualities in life, but I find myself wondering how much the necessity to proclaim this identity might also constrain the freedom one would feel to create a more blemished persona on the page. Especially one who shares your good name. □

Laura Kipnis's *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation* will be published by Metropolitan Books in November.