

News



Sebastian Shakespeare

8 Jul 2008

Recommend

Roll up, roll up for the literary catfight of the summer. Amanda Foreman has been accused of devaluing the art of biography by posing naked behind a pile of copies of her tome on Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire. Rival biographer Kathryn Hughes claims this shameless act of self-promotion ushered in a new era of books commissioned more for the author's looks than their contents. "Photogenic young women are routinely commissioned to produce biographies of equally camera-ready subjects, regardless of whether they are equipped to do so," says Hughes. "The results are often intellectually slight and stylistically poor."

Hughes has been gunning for Foreman for years and back in 1999 described her biography, published the year before, as "a competent but unremarkable book" which made capital out of the parallels between Georgiana and [Princess Diana](#). But writing a biography these days is fraught with risk. If you trespass too much on previous scholarship you lay yourself open to charges of plagiarism and if you trespass too little you are charged with not having done enough research.

Whatever your subject you will inevitably be encroaching on someone else's "patch" - as AN Wilson found to his cost. Wilson described the second volume of Bevis Hillier's biography of [John Betjeman](#) as "a hopeless mishmash of a book". When Wilson later produced his own Betjeman biography, Hillier exacted revenge by sending him a hoax letter purportedly from one of Betjeman's mistresses. Wilson published the letter in his book unaware that it contained an acrostic which spelt out the message, "AN Wilson is a sh*t".

Likewise when Valerie Grove and Graham Lord embarked on rival biographies of [John Mortimer](#), there was no love lost between them. Grove damned Lord with faint praise as "a competent journalist" and said his book was "vindictive".

It's said that academic disputes are so heated because the stakes are so low. Disputes between biographers are so fraught because their sales are - mostly - so low. Historian John Campbell bemoaned the fact that Ffion Hague's new biography of David Lloyd George had relied heavily on his own book and yet would do so much better in the shops. "I am a bit peeved because she's a big name and will sell thousands more copies of her book," he said. "A celebrity name will sell far more than the honest toiler in the vineyard." Talk about sour grapes.

So far the decorous Ms Foreman has stopped short of exchanging insults with her accuser. Maybe she should rise above it all and let the reader decide. Foreman has sold 206,000 copies worldwide of her Georgiana biography. And Ms Hughes? Her latest book, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*, has shifted just 28,759.

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