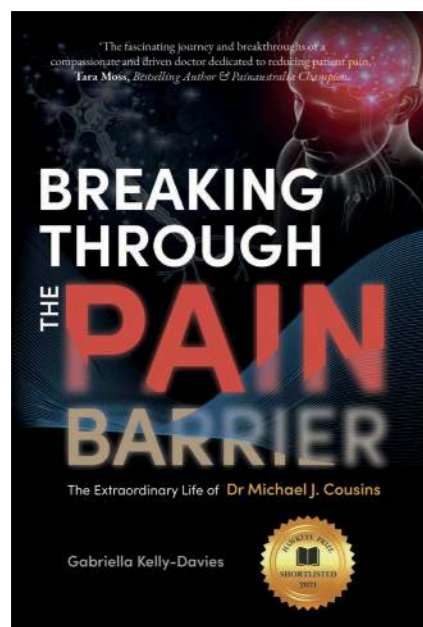


# How do you write the biography of a living scientist? Uncovering the gold nuggets...

BY GABRIELLA KELLY-DAVIES



Gabriella Kelly-Davies is a biographer and has studied biography and life story writing at the University of Oxford, the Australian National University and Sydney University

Gabriella is currently enrolled in a PhD program in biography writing. *Breaking through the pain barrier. The extraordinary life of Dr Michael J. Cousins* was written as part of her PhD.

Last year I published *Breaking through the pain barrier. The extraordinary life of Dr Michael J. Cousins*—the biography of Dr Michael Cousins AO, a trailblazing Australian pain medicine pioneer who played a pivotal role in shaping modern pain medicine.

While writing the biography, I faced countless choices, many of which were puzzling because the theory, art and craft of biography is a hotly contested subject with a 'dizzying array of viewpoints'. Which viewpoint to accept or reject? And why? Given the lack of a rulebook on how to write biography, I turned to the scholars and other biographers for inspiration.

The literary scholar Paula Backscheider describes four key choices shaping a biography and the reader's experience. These include the biographer's voice, the relationship between a biographer and subject, the ways evidence is understood and dealt with, and how the personality of the subject is understood, represented and used to shape a life.

...today's readers are more interested in how a subject's journey affects ordinary people rather than how 'prominent people shaped events'.

After deciding to write *Breaking through the pain barrier*, a vital choice was whether it should be authorised or unauthorised. This is a vexed issue requiring careful analysis and a deep understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Another issue was how to avoid writing a hagiography (a biography that glorifies its subject) because of my relationship with Michael as his patient of many years due to suffering daily migraines after a bike accident on my 24th birthday.

A crucial choice was how to maintain an attitude of scepticism. One issue all biographers agree on is that interviewees are notoriously unreliable as narrators and Stacy Schiff, who wrote Cleopatra's biography, warns biographers to 'take no-one at their word'. Hermione Lee, an acclaimed Virginia Woolf biographer, agrees, claiming: 'Even in the most sober and factual biographical narratives, what actually happened can be ambiguous or obscure.'

Biographers can spend a great deal of time sorting out the myths or false trails their subject has created about their own lives. Witnesses, friends, and enemies have their own agendas, or misremember events, or embroider their anecdotes over the years.'

The same caution applies when studying letters and diaries. In a controversial article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Beatles biographer Craig Brown questioned the truth of Samuel Pepys' diary, suggesting: 'No-one will ever know whether Samuel Pepys misheard some conversations he quoted in his diary or that his interpretation of events was not warped by his own imagination, or his desire to shape a good story.' In getting to the truth of a subject and the meaning of their life, Shelley biographer Richard Holmes asks himself

I wanted to understand how his patients experienced him, hoping it would shed light on his values, motivations and behaviour, and why he drove himself so hard despite the toll it took on him.

four key questions: 'Does my version hold good for readers? Can they believe I've tried to tell the truth? Can they feel they've met this person? And can they see why I think this life is still important, why it's still significant to us?'

At first, the research process was overwhelming because of the sheer volume of material Michael and other pain scholars wrote. I knew from the biographer and scholar Ira Nadel that biographers are 'in danger of suffocating from the collected mass of material and failing to separate what's important from the trivial,' and I wanted to avoid this problem. Still, I didn't want to miss anything vital and worried about getting the nuance of my subject's character and the science right.

An aspect of the material's scientific complexity that concerned me was making it accessible for a general audience. Catherine Reef, who wrote a biography of Florence Nightingale, advises science biographers to ask themselves what readers might already know or not know, and what they need to know to follow the story of a scientist or doctor.

Once I'd spent months studying the pain medicine literature, I started interviewing Michael every week. Sitting opposite him during interviews

and looking at photographs of pain medicine pioneers enabled me to describe Michael and his early mentors with physical and psychological specificity to help readers perceive characters in their 'mind's eye'. Debby Applegate, biographer of the social reformer Henry Ward Beecher, believes this specificity enables readers to perceive the character in their mind's eye. It involves 'constant sensitivity to the materials and an eye for all that characterises and "represents" all that is vivid and human in the subject,' according to the scholar and biographer Leon Edel.

As Michael's journey unfolded in our interviews, I became familiar with the leading lights of the pain world. But I didn't want to just meet his friends and those in his circle who might give a rose-tinted view, so I set out to interview all those who were still alive and to read the biographies, diaries, letters, journal articles, textbooks and speeches of those past and present, because 'using different lenses of multiple observers allows a biographer to emphasise the diversity of truths about a human being'.

The historian Barbara Caine suggests for today's readers, 'It's not the light shed on the lives of powerful individuals which is most important, but rather what can be learned from the lives of less exalted and ordinary people.' Knowing today's readers are more interested in how a subject's journey affects ordinary people rather than how 'prominent people shaped events,' I interviewed several of Michael's patients because the vision driving him was reducing their suffering by improving the treatment of pain. I wanted to understand how his patients experienced him, hoping it would shed light on his values, motivations and behaviour, and why he drove himself so hard despite the toll it took on him.

In selecting interview questions, I often asked interviewees what they could see, hear, smell and feel in various situations, to help me reconstruct scenes and dramatic episodes from Michael's life. I wanted the reader to see each scene, imagining what Michael might have been experiencing at the time and what else was happening around him in that moment. I also wanted them to feel his desperation to improve pain management and his frustration when obstacles littered his path.

Six months after the first interview, I started drafting the manuscript. I wasn't sure if it was too soon and I should wait until I'd completed more interviews and research, but I felt ready to get started. Biographers differ on when they put pen to paper. Stacy Schiff begins to write after she's completed most of the research because by then she's identified the key themes, and 'the shape of the narrative has begun to glint in the distance'. But Michael Holroyd, Lytton Strachey's biographer, starts earlier, usually when he's three-quarters of the way through the research. 'I feel that if I can only start writing it will give me the energy and guidance to finish the archival work,' he said. 'Starting to write is very difficult.'

Bringing the story of a scientist or doctor to life involves sharing with readers what makes them tick, and 'what set them ticking,' according to Richard Holmes, who suggests readers of science biography want to 'read about scientific work as part of a life story,' one that involves 'adventures of the human spirit'. Readers long to understand what drives scientists to make discoveries. Also, how they deal with uncertainty, dead ends and mistakes. Contemporary readers are also curious about psychological and social interpretations of scientists' lives and non-scientific aspects such as love, religion and politics.'

I questioned how to provide vivid details to bring people and events to life, but to do this succinctly, to ensure I didn't write a bloated book. After much deliberation and trial and error, I decided to prioritise material that represented turning points and pivotal moments in Michael's life and the history of pain medicine rather than trying to represent the entire arc of his life.

The choices I've explored in this article are just the tip of the iceberg and there are countless more that space prevents me examining here. But what I can say is that my questions and choices fell into four key categories:

#### Capturing scientific wonder

'Science is always a story,' Richard Holmes said. 'A detective story, perhaps; a mystery story – but always a story of human lives;' one that captures a scientist's passion for research and portray the essence of scientific wonder. To some biographers, unlocking the 'Eureka moment' is so important they focus on it exclusively rather than writing a three-dimensional portrait of a whole

person, but it's vital to strike a balance between portraying a scientist's public and private lives, including their 'interior life', hopes, dreams and even fantasies.

#### Getting beyond the legend

Patrick White's biographer, David Marr, believes the 'potency of biography is its compelling intimacy', but a biographer must make several choices to achieve this intimacy without destroying the human being behind the legend. Hermione Lee believes it involves getting 'behind the public performance and showing us the real person at home in his undress'. But is this possible? Virginia Woolf claimed: 'Biographers pretend they know people,' and several scholars argue that biographies create an illusion of intimacy with the subject, rather than real intimacy.

## Biographers differ on when they put pen to paper... Six months after the first interview, I started drafting the manuscript.

Getting to know a subject in intimate detail, if that's possible, and striking a balance between all aspects of their life, involves making choices about how to illuminate character, values, motivation and behaviour. 'Literature is about the human condition,' the biographer T.J. Stiles said. 'It's about what it means to be a human being moving through the world. It comes through in the complexity of characters.' It involves showing the reader what a person's life was really like and what it means to us now.

#### A living subject

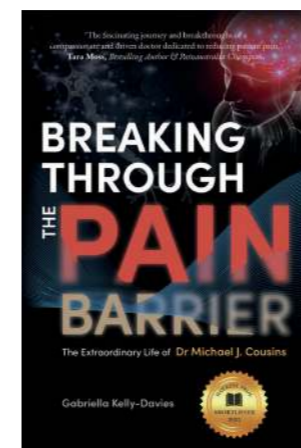
There are many choices to make when writing the biography of a living subject. Like Julia Gillard's biographer Jacqueline Kent, most biographers prefer subjects who are not only 'safely dead', but 'have no family' to minimise the risk of interference by those seeking to curate a certain image or reputation. Some of the choices biographers of living subjects face are issues around privacy and ethics, disclosure of secrets, embarrassing moments and sensitive information, dealing with gatekeepers, and potential legal disputes.

image or reputation. Some of the choices biographers of living subjects face are issues around privacy and ethics, disclosure of secrets, embarrassing moments and sensitive information, dealing with gatekeepers, and potential legal disputes.

#### Narrative strategy

Deciding on the narrative strategy involves countless choices around structure, narrative voice, pace, rhythm, word choice, interpretation and use of fiction techniques to bring the subject to life and keep the reader sitting on the edge of their seat wondering what happens next. While choosing the 'right' narrative strategy can involve years of trial and error, it is quite okay to try one approach, assess it, then toss it in the bin, reimagine and rewrite it, no matter how many drafts it takes. It's comforting to know Virginia Woolf's essays often went through multiple drafts and one of her pieces for The Times went through 27 drafts! So did Kate Grenville's biography of her mother, Nance Russell.

While these choices might seem overwhelming at first, the process of making them is tremendously exciting. Please don't let them put you off, because biography enables the biographer and reader to better understand themselves and the human condition. It's also exhilarating, especially when you uncover the missing gold nugget that unlocks the true meaning of a life.



'A meticulous, inspiring study of one extraordinary life. Gabriella Kelly-Davies' compelling and passionate account shows how medicine can be transformed by the power of one individual. This work of integrity and compassion offers us some much-needed hope.'

Lee Kofman,  
Author of *Imperfect*.

## PUTIN

In our school-yard  
there's a new bully  
who does not know  
the rules – fully.  
When party invites  
are handed round,  
when teams are chosen  
it will be found,  
he is in a sad place  
all on his own.  
Winners of trophies  
who take them home  
find how quickly they tarnish,  
laden with dust,  
no friends come admiring,  
there is no trust.

What a cold lonely place  
it is at the top  
with monuments balancing  
ready to drop  
of previous bullies  
who are no more  
long vanished through  
death's lonely door.  
They could have made this world  
a better place  
been remembered with love,  
a saving grace.  
Instead, they trod  
their lonely path  
to eternity

BY  
VALERIE PYBUS