

TLC Writing Prompt: by Rodge Glass On Biography & Autobiography

Introduction

Let's start by reading the text of a lecture by the great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, originally given in 1966 and translated by Katherine Silver for the book *Professor Borges* (New Directions, 2013):

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/07/28/lecture-johnson-and-boswell/>

In this lecture, Borges explores how James Boswell constructed his portrait of Samuel Johnson in the influential biography *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. But Borges also interrogates the approach taken, the decisions a creative writer takes as part of her creative process. In this case Boswell made himself a character in his subject's story, a kind of foil for Johnson, all the better to make his subject to stand out. Here is Borges, interpreting Boswell's approach and speculating as to Boswell's reasoning:

'Perhaps Boswell simply felt it as an aesthetic necessity that to better showcase Johnson, there should be a very different character alongside him. Something like in the novels of Conan Doyle: the mediocre Dr. Watson makes the brilliant Sherlock Holmes stand out even more. And Boswell gives himself the role of the ridiculous one, and he maintains it throughout the entire book. Yet, we feel a sincere friendship between the two in the same way we feel it when we read Conan Doyle's novels. It is natural, as I have said, that this would be so; for Johnson was a famous man and alone, and of course he liked to feel by his side the friendship of a much younger man, who so obviously admired him.'

Now let's have a go at writing a little biography and autobiography, exploring in practice the kinds of challenges Boswell faced, and many non-fiction writers have faced since in trying to represent real people in imaginative ways.

Exercise: After Johnson & Boswell

Write a short scene involving two characters, in which one character is the focus and the other more minor character is the writer. *You* should be one of the characters. The other one should be someone real that you know well and feel you can sketch a persuasive portrait of in a short period of time. Pick a concrete time, place and

subject to explore, something that happened recently. Include dialogue, internal thought and description.

Here are some writerly elements to consider:

- What is the **voice** of your character like?
- What is the **language** of your character like?
- What are the **physical mannerisms** of your character?
- What are the **dynamics** between the two characters? Who has the **power**?
- What is the **background** or **setting** to the scene, and how can you bring it to life for your readers?

These elements are just a guide, intended to get you thinking about the creative process, also about observation and reflection, the key skills involved in writing about lives. One question, extensively explored, might get you as far as less work on three questions. Your tutor will decide how to proceed.

For discussing with a friend or fellow writer (online!)

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What were the challenges of writing your subject?
- 2) What was it like trying to write about yourself?
- 3) Have you learned anything either about your own personality or that of your subject by writing about it?
- 4) Were there any moral concerns or dilemmas to consider when writing your piece, and if so how did you face them?
- 5) Imagine you were to expand what you've just started into an entire book about the life of your subject. Which part of their life would you choose to focus on, and why?