Kiss and tell and index

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In Alain de Botton’s novel, *Kiss and tell* (published by Macmillan, 1995), the hero/narrator, dismissed by his latest girlfriend as totally self-absorbed, determines to prove his possession of the quality of empathy by writing a biography, seeing the biographer’s mission as ‘understanding a human being as fully as one person could hope to understand another, submerging myself in a life other than my own’. For his subject he will select someone quite ordinary, to demonstrate ‘the extraordinariness of any life’. So *Kiss and tell* details the life of the fictitious Isabel Rogers, ‘the next person to walk into [his] life’, presented in proper biographical format. The 12 chapters begin with ‘The early years’, ‘The early dates’, ‘Family trees’; the volume comes complete with preface and index, and two sections of photographs of Isabel, her family and friends, all appearing entirely authentic.

A reviewer wrote of de Botton’s previous works, *Essays in love* and *The romantic movement*: ‘his books are original hybrids, part novel, part philosophical reverie’. This hybrid novel/biography/biographical critique comprises three strands. It is at once the (pseudo-)biography of Isabel; an account of the narrator’s developing relationship with her (‘one may suggest a connection between attachment and the biographical impulse ... a true biography demands a more or less conscious emotional relationship between author and subject’); and much consideration of the nature of biography itself. The tenor of this can well be assessed by quoting the subheadings under BIOGRAPHY in the index:

- categories
- of dead
details given in
discrepancies between author and subject
eating habits in
ending
family research
ghost-written
impulse to write
lack of understanding of subject
length
men writing about women
private life in
psychology in
relationship between author and subject
writing

The 10-page preface quotes Samuel Johnson:

> There has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only has every man great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such a uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from decorations and disguises, that there is scarcely any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind.

There is reflection on the nature of family trees, adapted for this fiction.

The traditional family tree, emerging as it did from the feudal age, was primarily devoted to stressing lineage and dates of birth and death. But in a more psychological age, was the primary responsibility still to record such factual details? Listening to Isabel’s description of her family, I wondered if one might not inaugurate a different structure, one which traced not what lands, titles and estates moved down the generations, but rather the passage of emotional dispositions, in short, a [Larkinesque] tree of family fucked-upness?

This is illustrated by a family tree conventional in layout but with annotations such as:

- Christina — depressive, repressive, hysterical
- Henry Howard — alcoholic, promiscuous, authoritarian
- Isabel — ‘We can go into it another day. Are you sure I can’t get you anything to eat?’
- Lucy — sandwich problem, masochist, intellectual insecurity
- Paul — aggressive, worshipped too much by mother, neglected by father/sisters

The index — 12 pages, to the text’s 246 — is a properly detailed and structured biographical index. It fills out proper names merely mentioned in the text:

- Cioran, E. M.
- Dostoievsky, Fedor Mikhailovich

Large general topics are duly specified as to aspect:

- hands, taking notice of
  - London:
    - finding way round
    - views of living in
- men, differences between women and sex:
  - continuing friendship after
  - embarrassment of
  - first experience
  - liberal attitude to
  - manual of
  - substitutes for
    - as symbol of intimacy
    - tastes in

with full breakdown for major characters, such as:

- Rogers, Christopher (father)
- behaviour in restaurants
- birth of child
- dental work
- family background
- interest in technology
- with Isabel as child
- Isabel’s opinion of
- lack of jealousy
- losing car park tickets
- making friends with everyone
- marriage
- mildness
- move to London
- plan for looking at paintings
Kiss and tell and index

seeing Isabel at Barbican
sex with Lavinia Rogers
singing
spelling pedantry
work

Isabel’s own entry fills four-and-a-half columns; that of her mother, one-and-a-half.

Alain de Botton replied to my enquiry as to who compiled this index:

The index in my book was not all my own work by any means. I just suggested some subjects — all the more playful ones — and then a Macmillan/Picador indexer set to work and did the rest.

‘The more playful subjects’? These perhaps indicate teasing entries that lure the reader to turn to the text referred to, and may include:

bathroom, activities in
cockroach, in water glass
cuddles
friendship, after sex
geographical deficiency
insults, self-inflicted
louche males
shipwreck, usefulness in
sitting positions
whole hog, going

and subheadings under Rogers, Isabel Jane
half-losing virginity
losing virginity

I asked the publisher (in March 1999) for the name of the chief indexer of this book, but was told that as the book was published in 1995 they had no record of who the indexer was. Alas. But as an index to a hybrid fiction/biography, this must be reckoned a most interesting example of our craft.

Acknowledgements
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