

Kiss and Tell

Alain du Botton

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Alain de Botton is a young writer (born 69) who has made a name for himself writing books with oblique perspectives using the mannerism of disarming naivety. He wrote a short study on how reading Proust may change your life; and a few years later a similar study of some well-known philosophers with the same down-to-earth perspective of how their thoughts can have practical applications for the non-philosophical reader. An even more recent book concerns the art of travel, and how the dreams of exotic ventures almost never live up to expectations.

Kiss and Tell is about the practice of writing biographies. It is an earlier oeuvre, yet with many of the traits to be found in his later, supposedly more mature work. Why are biographies so long? And why are they constantly getting longer at a rate far outstripping the life-expectancies of their subjects? Why such detail? is it because even the most insignificant happening to an extra-ordinary person provides valuable instruction? Following the suggestion of Keats, writing to his brother, would it not be interesting to know exactly under which circumstances Shakespeare wrote his immortal lines? How was he seated? On a chair, on a sofa, or was he lying on the floor? Where and how were his legs positioned? Clearly such questions have answers, although there is no longer any way we can find them. The classical full-length biography is that of Boswell on Johnson. Boswell made a virtue of relating the most inconsequential detail of his subject, so we now know the various tics of Johnson, what he ate, what was his opinion on this and that random matter. Just as the bevy of details to be found in Pepys diary now charm us and gives us delightful insights in the quotidian life of a 17th century gentleman; insights that would have been denied us, would Pepys had a more editorial and censorious cast of mind in his writing, so the fullness of the Boswell biography gives us invaluable information, which would otherwise be lost to us. Still is it only the great and extraordinary, who deserve such full treaties, what about everybody's entitlement to fifteen minute fame, should that not also include a full-length biography? The sheer impossibility of allowing every living person his or her own full-length biographical study is easily demonstrated by purely arithmetical considerations. Still what would be the effect if a completely ordinary person would have his or her life observed and evaluated with the same seriousness as that of the very great? Are we not all of us uniquely unique, and are not all of our life-histories, even if devoid of outward drama or generally acknowledged distinction, intricate and exciting?

du Botton sets out to present the life of a completely ordinary young woman living in London, having a succession of transient boy-friends (one of which appears to be the biographer himself) eking out a living in a dead-end job, with complete seriousness. Now, the reader may ask him or herself at this moment whether this is an actual attempt depicting a living woman, or just a novel, trying to present the *trompe d'oeuille* effect? The natural guess is the latter, because after all, who would allow such an exercise to be completed, without being outraged enough to sue the author? Do du Botton in his

exercise gets the opportunity to reflect on some obvious problems as to the delineation of a life. Should it be presented chronologically? What things should be selected, all of the things you learn of a subject may carry no information beyond the factual. One uncharitable speculation as be due to the fact that the author has spent years doing diligent research and is thus loath not to use every tidbit he or she may have unearthed. Thus a Richard Ellman may present some precise information about the school-dues due of the father of Joyce, things that Joyce never knew, nor even cared to know. Why does such information add to our understanding of Joyce? Maybe it just adds more to the understanding of his biographer? This leads to the most important question. Is it possible to completely understand another being, or maybe it is even possible to understand another being more thoroughly than he or she understands themselves? At least that is the conceit of psychologists in general and psychiatrists in particular? So the author thinks up all kinds of approaches. Could a simple questionnaire, like the one Proust deigned to fill out in his youth provide a nut-shell characterization of a person Or could it be done in a small box, like in the New York Review personals?

The approach allows du Botton to touch upon many of our foibles, like our fear of having our secrets revealed. All biography is founded on the conviction of empathy. namely the ability to imaginatively recreate the inner life of another through our common humanity. Just as Johnson speculated, that we all share the basics, motivated by similar things, always clinging to hope, always having to face frustration. All those universals being most effectively conveyed through particular manifestations of a unique individual.

As with the other books of du Botton, it is entertaining provided you are partial to the voice of its author. And when it come to writing, you really read, unless you are trying to figure out a manual, say in order to reassemble a piece of furniture bought at IKEA; not to be instructed and informed, but to listen to the lull of a voice, just like you may like to sit by the seaside, and listen to the gentle surf of waves softly beating the shore.

Angers, May 22 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se