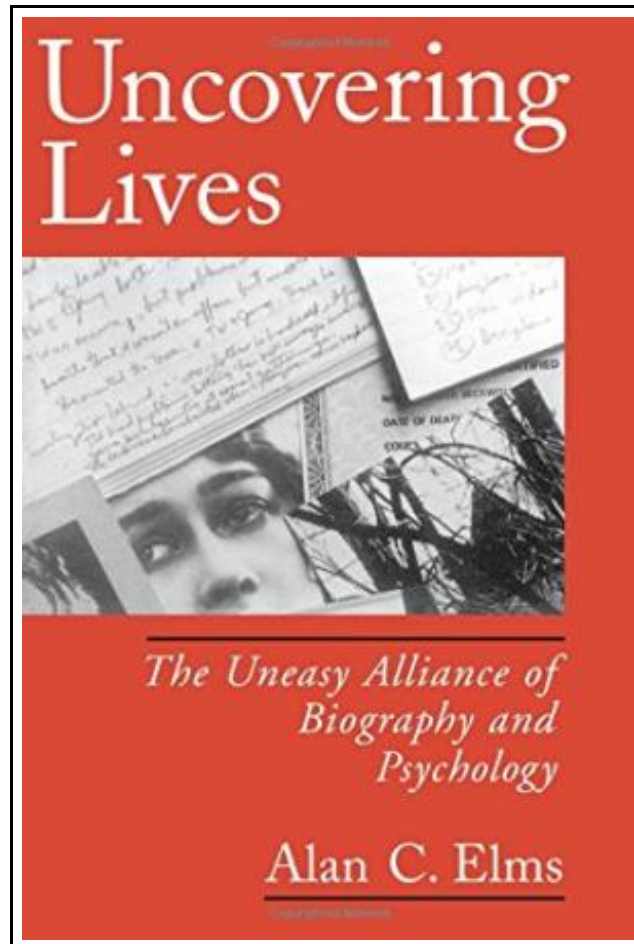


Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology



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Reviews

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(Alex Jenkins)

UNCOVERING LIVES: THE UNEASY ALLIANCE OF BIOGRAPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY



Oxford University Press. Paperback. Book Condition: New. Paperback. 328 pages. Dimensions: 9.0in. x 5.8in. x 1.0in. Psychobiography is often attacked by critics who feel that it trivializes complex adult personalities, explaining the large deeds of great individuals, as George Will wrote, by some slight the individual suffered at a tender age--say, 7, when his mother took away a lollipop. Worse yet, some writers have clearly abused psychobiography--for instance, to grind axes from the right (Nancy Clinch on the Kennedy family) or from the left (Fawn Brodie on Richard Nixon)--and others have offered woefully inept diagnoses (such as Albert Goldmans portrait of Elvis Presley as a split personality and a delusional paranoid). And yet, as Alan Elms argues in *Uncovering Lives*, in the hands of a skilled practitioner, psychobiography can rival the very best traditional biography in the insights it offers. Elms makes a strong case for the value of psychobiography, arguing in large part from example. Indeed, most of the book features Elms own fascinating case studies of over a dozen prominent figures, among them Sigmund Freud (the father of psychobiography), B. F. Skinner, Isaac Asimov, L. Frank Baum, Vladimir Nabokov, Jimmy Carter, George Bush, Saddam Hussein, and Henry Kissinger. These profiles make intriguing reading. For example, Elms discusses the fiction of Isaac Asimov in light of the latters acrophobia (fear of heights) and mild agoraphobia (fear of open spaces)--and Elms includes excerpts from a series of letters between himself and Asimov. He reveals an unintended subtext of *The Wizard of Oz*--that males are weak, females are strong (think of Scarecrow, Tin Man, the Lion, and the Wizard, versus the good and bad witches and Dorothy herself)--and traces this in part to Baums childhood heart disease, which kept him from strenuous activity, and to his relationship with his mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn...



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