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Biography, Volume 34, Number 1, Winter 2011, pp. 108-118 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: [10.1353/bio.2011.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2011.0015)



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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? INTIMATE PASTS MADE PUBLIC

CLAIRE LYNCH

Genealogy, like life writing, spreads itself across a wide range of definitions and contradictions. It is a profession as well as a hobby, a passion as well as a chore, and an investigation into the lives of others as a way to learn more about the self. Running through it all is a core assumption that humans are “defined by who and where we are ‘from’” (Watson 297)—that the question “who do you think you are” can be answered if only the right documents are uncovered. The reality is patently far more complex; genealogical documents often raise more questions than they answer, since inconsistencies, surprises, and scandals are at the core of family history research. The television program *Who Do You Think You Are?*, from which this article draws its title, poses this multifaceted question of self-identification by following a celebrity tracing his or her family history. The television medium is also crucial to the process, allowing the viewer to witness the unfolding of the “public” family narrative via archival research, photographs, and memories, as well as the “private” journey of self-discovery experienced by the celebrity protagonist.

The roots of this article grew out of an email I received from a popular online retailer. It began as follows:

Dear Family Tree Fan, as you’ve shown an interest in genealogy titles recently, we thought you might like to see our full range of family tree software. Whether you want to uncover the past or record your heritage for the future, our family tree software is perfect for your first dip into the gene pool.¹

The misplaced certainty of the targeted marketing technique seemed to be strangely at odds with the product. I, they presumed, was in the market for self-discovery; they, meanwhile, knew exactly who and what I was, a family tree fan no less. In the first instance, the email points to an appealing flaw

in the technology. Since the email was generated in response to the IP (internet protocol) address of my computer, the automated system had no way of knowing if it was really me showing “an interest in genealogy titles,” and so made the leap of judgment: what I read, or plan to read, is who and what I am. That small marker of identity, the number linking my computer to the company’s website, led the retailer astray in the quest to discover who I am; such is the danger with following clues. Archives, be they paper or electronic, are equally haphazard, “made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve” (Steedman 68). What, I wondered, might my descendents think, stumbling upon a copy of this email, unintentionally archived on an archaic hard drive—“evidence at last! We do belong to a long line of family tree fans”? Of course, such casual misinterpretations are, rather aptly, the very stuff genealogy is based on. While inadvertently shadowing the act of genealogy, the email also outlines the tools and skills required. It offers the reader methods to find resources from the past, and invites the purchase of products to create records for the future: text and technology, historic and genetic.

DOING AND WATCHING FAMILY HISTORY

The books and software advertised in the email point to the heightened interest in the cultivation of family trees in the UK. The BBC television franchise *Who Do You Think You Are?*[®] (*WDYTYA*) is at the center of this, responsible for spin-off television series in several countries, numerous books, a monthly magazine, websites, specialist software, and a large annual exhibition, designed to help people answer that most searching of identity questions (*Who*).² Taking *WDYTYA* as a case study, this article will explore not only the quest for identity via the sources of self on which genealogy is based—birth certificates, photographs, and family trees—but also the televised production of ancestral narratives, or what I will call biogravision. The link between televised biography and textual biography is clear to those who consider television history a form of “telling stories about ourselves to ourselves” (Hunt 90). However, for those genealogists who have faith in the archive as the “temple of fact, objectivity and omniscience,” but choose to ignore its dual function as “the factory of deceit, distortion, and prejudice” (Starn 388), the biographical aspects of the program are frequently a step too far. As Watson puts it, that which “autobiography celebrates as the fruitful variety of remembered human constructions of events is suspect to the genealogist” (303). It is at this juncture of simultaneous mistrust and empathy that biography, genealogy, family history, and reality TV converge in biogravision.

FALSE INTIMACIES AND LIMITED PUBLICS

The format of the original BBC television program revolves around a celebrity uncovering family secrets, travelling in the footsteps of ancestors, and linking family stories to events in world history. The numerous archivists and researchers whose role is to animate dead documents by permitting them to be “read, and used, and narrativised” (Steedman 68) are central to the modeling process, which viewers are encouraged to duplicate. Celebrity protagonists are selected for ancestral stories that reflect those of people across Britain—for example, the actress and writer Meera Syal, whose family originated in the Punjab, or the Olympic rower Matthew Pinsent, who traces ancestors who died in the First World War. The format has been sold to several countries, in addition to the numerous other spin-offs in the form of magazines, books, software, and events.³ Its launch in the UK in 2004 followed an “unprecedented interest” in history by all forms of popular media at the turn of the twenty-first century (Cannadine, “Introduction” 1). Subsequent developments, which led to a distinct section of the media seemingly becoming obsessed with the past, can now be observed in the form of satellite and digital channels such as *Yesterday* and the *Biography Channel*, making history on television officially “fashionable” (Downing 7). At the same time, historical hobbies grew in popularity, with heritage organizations like the National Trust and English Heritage appealing to a wider demographic, and local archaeological and genealogical groups enjoying record membership. As an example of biogravision, *WDYTYA* can be seen as both tapping into this trend and constructing it by modeling and promoting identity quests which millions have followed. As Hunt would put it, television can become “a powerfully beneficial force helping to democratise knowledge” as well as developing “new approaches to understanding multiple pasts” (89). *WDYTYA* did not, of course, invent the fields of popular genealogy and family history, but it did disrupt expectations of who did it and what they were doing it for.

This influence was not accidental. In their press release for the original series, the BBC wrote:

A whole forest of family trees is set to flourish throughout Britain, thanks to a unique BBC initiative this autumn aimed at inspiring the nation to explore its roots. A major new series delves into the family history of ten familiar faces, tracing their ancestry and revealing secrets and surprises from their pasts. And the series gives viewers the tools to dig into their own pasts and uncover the part their ancestors played in shaping the nation of today. (Press)

The BBC intended to create a trend. In doing so, they made popular and accessible something that had been the preserve of dedicated and experienced

amateurs. The combination of prime-time television and celebrities from a variety of backgrounds (athletes, politicians, actors) gave the instant impression that this was a question anyone could and should ask themselves. By filming the celebrity protagonists in their own homes, driving their own cars, and looking through family photographs with their parents and siblings, the program makers created a supposed intimacy between the viewer and the subject. In other words, viewers brought into the private spaces of public figures were given permission to act as coconspirators in the intimate process of self-discovery the program constructs. Similarly, the voice-over that provides historical context, with micro-documentaries of, for example, the East India Company or the Industrial Revolution, creates a further link; their history might also be yours. When the Welsh athlete Colin Jackson takes a DNA test to further understand his Jamaican heritage, for instance, the results are discussed within the broader context of migration, slavery, and multiculturalism. Similarly, the radio and television personality Nicky Campbell, who chooses to trace his adoptive rather than biological family, is seen to make a statement about the meaning of “family” history that might provide a template for other adopted people seeking a different approach to tracing “roots.” Indeed, the popularity of the program overall can be understood as an “aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others” (Berlant, “Intimacy” 281). Access to online census returns and accessible websites meant at last that “at every level of enquiry, from the highest of high scholars, to casual browsers and family researchers,” ideas of expertise and entitlement were disrupted, creating “something approaching a democracy of knowledge” (Schama 27).⁴ Yet it is a democracy inevitably limited to official records of intimacy: paperwork providing evidence of marriages and children. Those who “don’t or can’t find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable” (Berlant, “Intimacy” 286). To add to these already significant barriers, those with access to the knowledge sought to restrict it to an elite group. At the same time that large numbers flocked to the National Archives, inspired by the program, established family history societies began to express their distaste for a phenomenon they saw as undermining the values of their work.

GOING PUBLIC

WDYTYA nudges the family history researcher away from solely archival explorations towards life writing, gently suggesting with photographic montages and personal reminiscences that one might care to formulate a storyline as well as a timeline. A model example of this can be seen in the episode in which the actress Kim Cattrall seeks to uncover the seventy year mystery of

her grandfather, who disappeared leaving her grandmother with three small children in severe poverty in the slums of Liverpool. The program shadows the genre forms of a detective story, as the villain George Baugh is identified as a bigamist when his “other family” is discovered. The photograph of a smiling Baugh on the beach with his other (healthy and happy) children provides evidence of his secret life, and is in painful contrast to the recollections of the children he left behind, the now elderly mother and aunts of the celebrity protagonist. At the end of the episode, Cattrall literally narrates her findings to the private audience of her mother and aunts, and implicitly, the television viewing public. In her dramatic retelling, including invented dialogue and the poetic conclusion “he was selfish to the very end,” Cattrall transforms the frustration of the family mystery into a cathartic fable. It is exactly this satisfaction that viewers hope to translate to their own searches.

Beyond the program, online discussion groups and web-based genealogical records have created a hybrid form of life writing; a move, one might argue, from the private act of collecting facts to the public one of narrating them. At the “Who Do You Think You Are Live 2010” exhibition, the transition from private interest to public act was made manifest.⁵ Described in the brochure as offering “the most esteemed speakers, the biggest range and depth of expertise,” and an “incredible and comprehensive range of exhibitors” (Campion 7), it set out to satisfy thousands of enthusiastic family historians. A curiosity in the past via one’s ancestors (or vice versa) is unremarkable, yet the sense of competitive ancestry and the privileging of trauma and scandal which the television program and live event promotes is a spectacle worth examining. The live event offers an intensified example of the whole piece, providing a real insight into the scale of popularity of an activity traditionally conducted privately in the silence of the national archives or parish records. Prior to attending the live event as an observer, I contacted several of the exhibitors with an online survey called “Family History Trends and Developments.” Participants were asked to reflect on why their organization was represented at the exhibition, and how the popularity of the *WDYTYA* brand had influenced the decision, and to gather opinions on reasons for the wider increase in family history’s popularity. What became clear at once was a split in the wider community of genealogists, family history researchers, local history societies, universities, and so on, between the pro and anti *WDYTYA* camps. Survey results indicated that the exhibitors considered television programs to be the biggest influence on the increased popularity in family history, and although several were critical of the *WDYTYA* brand specifically, hundreds of organizations were willing to be associated with it for the thousands of clients it brought their way.⁶ What some saw as a popularizing and largely accurate and interesting

account of their passion, others took to be a belittling corporatization of their life's work. In other words, the very popularity and accessibility, the opening up of the intimate group, which attracted so many new enthusiasts, was seen as highly problematic by established practitioners.

Borrowing from Brian Moeran's recent study of Book Fairs, the *WDYTYA* Live event is well understood within the framework of a "tournament of values." At the event, people are brought together "in short-term, face-to-face interaction in a structured environment" in which they "reassert the economic, social, and symbolic values that constitute the overall field" (138). It is at the live event, in other words, where the hierarchies, apparently deconstructed through the democratizing medium of television, become reasserted. Just as with large international book fairs, the size and professionalism of each stand and its location within the exhibition space is taken as a status marker. Similarly, individuals and institutions reassert their claims as gatekeepers to expertise, dispensing knowledge to the amateur enthusiasts. At the same time, individual researchers, queuing for a few minutes contact with an archivist, are placed in competition with one another; who has gone back the farthest or found out the most? This emphasis on quantity draws criticisms reminiscent of those directed at "obsessive collectors of biographical information" for being no more than "collectors of butterflies, postage stamps or cigarette cards" (Stone 49).

On television, archivists appear with papers in their hands, already transcribed; old acquaintances of the subject's great-grandmother happen to be standing on the corner at exactly the moment they pass by with a camera crew, and so on. For the family historian who travels to the National Archive without such a crew, the process can be long, frustrating, expensive, and fruitless. By presenting experts, such as archivists and historians, while at the same time depriving them of their "expert discourse, technical paraphernalia and peer group context" (Livingstone and Lunt 97), the program raises expectations that cannot be met. While experience soon leads non-celebrity family historians to understand that the onscreen quest is misrepresented as simplistic, many cannot help but resent the ease with which their celebrity counterparts produce an effective and meaningful record of their journey of self-discovery. Although this resentment might reasonably be seen as simple envy, it also points to the perceived importance of constructing a satisfactory final account of one's findings. In taking part in the program, the celebrities not only collate copies of the relevant documents, they also acquire a lavishly produced film, embedded graphic versions of their family tree, interviews and photographs, all captured, edited, and viewable. The non-celebrity family historian meanwhile gathers a bigger and bigger pile of photocopied census returns.

As an observer, an intriguing element of the live event was the perceived ignorance, or at least denial, of the complexity of the existential question being asked over and over again on every printed surface in the building. The query, challenge, even threat of the question “who do you think you are?,” endlessly repeated to the thousands of people clutching copies of birth certificates and faded photographs, created an uncanny scenario in which the quest for self-discovery was reflected infinitely. Of the exhibitors I interviewed, several had formed a concept of the self and the past as something knowable if only sufficient effort is applied. At the same time, an unproblematic codependency with history persisted. Ancestors were people who had lived through history; history belonged to you because they belonged to you. The process of collating more and more information, all of which ultimately leads to but cannot include or reference one’s own life, was seen as unremittingly worthwhile. Olympia was simply full of people simultaneously writing themselves in and out of history.

IDENTITY TEMPLATES

Who do you think you are? That big question, the question of all questions perhaps, is often translated by the program makers into more practical sub-questions: *where* can I find that pesky birth certificate, *how* can I translate the handwriting on the census, *when* did my great grandfather die? But for that ultimate *who* question, there seems a strange absence of whys. Why is this important? Why might the answer reside in the past at all? Thinking about the question carefully, it does not ask who you are in any objective, knowable sense, the kind of information archival records might provide, but who do you *think* you are, who do you doubt yourself to be, who do you hope or imagine yourself to be. The *WDYTYA* methodology combines official state records with memories and family anecdotes before molding them into a popular media format, including a clear narrative arc and final conclusion. This shift, which promotes the literal publicizing of the self, overlaps with Berlant’s claim that “therapy saturates the scene of intimacy” via various forms of “witnessing genres” (281–82). In their narratives of poverty, immigration, and illegitimacy, as well as stories of heroism and exception, the protagonists transform personally significant events into public spectacles via the program makers. The crucial distinction between this approach and traditional family history is the realignment of the central protagonist—it’s not called “who do you think they were,” after all. The search ceases to be about knowing those you did not or could not know, and becomes instead a matter of harvesting information from dead ancestors to transplant into one’s own sense of identity. What was once

a process of giving life to the image of dead ancestors has been reversed; it is they who are obliged to give meaning to the living.

Since the past is frequently viewed as synonymous with authenticity, devoid of the vexatious possibility that contaminates the present and future, it provides the ideal location for those engaged in the “obsessive desire to find a ‘true’ self” (Smith and Watson 7). Who you are, the program suggests, is not defined by one’s relation to long dead others, but rather, via the relationship you form with the search itself. For many, the identity template of choice is the researcher, finding, analyzing, and collecting data. Barring the production of a family tree, however, there is often little tangible output from the research. Demonstrating the instinct and process of biography without following through with the output is often regarded with faintly disguised condescension by those who observe those “lovers of their personal history” who “may never produce anything of substance from their researches even in an obscure parish magazine” (Tusa 124). For others, it is not the lure of objective research but the familial proximity, the role of descendant of people who suffered, which is attractive. The actor and writer Stephen Fry, for instance, breaks down in tears when he learns the fate of his ancestors sent to Auschwitz. Taking this still further, several *WDYTYA* protagonists construct themselves as either a victim or success story in response to discoveries about their ancestors. Actress Barbara Windsor, for example, subsumes the painful discovery of her ancestors’ workhouse records into her pride of being from “good working class stock” from the East End of London. While Windsor is able to consider her family’s gradual progression from poverty with some satisfaction, the chef Ainsley Harriott must confront his own personal success in light of his complex family history of slavery. When documents show that his great-great-grandfather, James Gordon Harriott, was a white slave owner, his sense of identity is placed under immense pressure. It is quite remarkable that documents like these, bigamous marriage certificates, or birth certificates proving illegitimacy, which would once have been destroyed in shame, are now brandished as a treasure, breaking the seal of privacy that would have once prevented the present from intruding on the intimate secrets of the past. In diverting the past from the private to the public sphere, the protagonist moves into the final role of storyteller, even if, as we have seen, they never write up the biography. Making leaps of faith, jumping to conclusions and numerous other imaginative acrobatics, again, is in quite a different mold to the steady, methodical, rooted approach of the old fashioned genealogist. It is this move to narration and self-reflection that the format of biogravision relies upon for its popularity and overall success, and which defines it as a form of intimate public in a way that traditional family-tree making was not.

CONCLUSION

Family history is arguably not the pursuit of truth at all, but rather an expression of the ultimate human fantasy, the pursuit of immortality. Throughout their research, family historians explore further and further back into the past; simultaneously, the records and family trees they produce are designed for future generations. This process effectively extends the researcher's sense of temporal identity behind and ahead of their own lifespan, without limitation. This use of an individual life to link the past with the future depends, as with life writing, upon the selective fictionalization of fact in order for a satisfactory plotline to emerge. Simply, if the traditional self-reflection of autobiography is rejected, it is only by dramatizing the archival findings, photographs, and memories that the individual at the center of the search can hope to answer the question "who do you think you are." Life writing critics have increasingly explored forms of life story making that go beyond the formal or the textual autobiography. Genealogical television, "biogravision," and the live events, online discussion lists, local groups, and magazines that have grown from it are also worthy of more focused attention. *WDYTYA* challenges genealogy and family history in their traditional formats by producing a narrative in which the shaping and editing of memory are acknowledged. At the same time, it distorts the complexity of the task, constructing an audience expectation that a satisfactory narrative is available to all those willing to search. The symbolic tree, the basis of *WDYTYA* imagery and the icon of the genealogist, is evidence of this contradiction. Rooting an individual to a place and time, the family tree also disguises hidden histories between branches where documents cease. The grand old oak with strong clear branches is an effective marketing ploy, covering for what might more accurately be represented by the virulent and untamed box hedge.

When considering biogravision within the wider scope of life writing, it might well be argued that genealogists are more "selfless" than traditional autobiographers. While there are parallels in the ways they negate the self by looking to others for meaning, they often go further with their collaborative practices via regional organizations, online communities—indeed, in the very focus on the family. Family historians specifically work around tasks very clearly about "them," not "us." Similarly, the net result of their work is focused on future generations, not about making explicit the author's authority in the present. Televised versions expand on this, reacting to the forces of globalization and social transformation, as Hunt would have it, by "helping to cement the individual within a broader historical lineage" (97). Yet television is only an aspect of all of this. It inspires or guides perhaps, but the

thousands of people I saw gathered in Kensington that day, and the millions across the UK and elsewhere like them, are engaged in something else. They endure the physical business of searching through records, of straining over scrawled handwriting, and of making sense of what the information means to their sense of past and present self. John Tusa recounts an anecdote of a fellow family historian letting out a “shriek of delight” when working in the otherwise silent reading room at the National Archives in Kew. It is an account of the clash between the private and public worlds, reinforcing the sense that the experience of discovery is more significant than the production of an imperfect text which recounts it:

No reading room supervisor hurried over to explain the rules of private working; no neighbour glared and shushed. Rather, several faces looked up, registered the event, and smiled a private smile of shared satisfaction. Something had been discovered. Perhaps something had been understood. I do not know what. It would have been intrusive to ask. It would not have mattered to me. But it mattered to him. I like to think the discovery was—on however small a scale—a moment of history. (125)

WDYTYA challenges the formal density of traditional genealogy represented in this example by transforming privately captivating information into publicly absorbing narratives. Tusa is quite wrong to say that his fellow researcher’s findings “would not have mattered” to him. As the program has shown, it is through the life stories of others that we come to know something of history and of ourselves. In its combination of narrative forms, biogravison does not threaten the traditions of life writing, genealogy, documentary, and drama upon which it draws. It does, however, ensure further validity for that definitive identity question “who do you think you are?” When searching through archival records, the researcher must change his or her self perception based both on what is found and what is not. The narrative produced as a result, whether shown on national television or repeated only to oneself, constitutes an act of life writing. By modeling the narration of past lives through a present-day subject, *WDYTYA* and other forms of biogravison have challenged the division between life writing and genealogy. No longer satisfied with the achievement of a “private smile,” today’s family history researchers are increasingly attracted to the notion that “we are not who we think we are, or who we create or imagine ourselves to be” (Watson 300).

NOTES

1. Amazon tracks past purchases and items browsed on its website to “determine your interests and suggest new titles we think you’ll enjoy.” These “Recommendations” are sent to customers via email, and displayed on the website when users are signed in.

2. Several other similar programs might also be invoked, but since *WDYTYA* is widely recognized as the standard-bearer, it will remain the focus here.
3. See, for example, the show's websites for the Republic of Ireland (RTÉ) and the US (NBC).
4. Perhaps the most popular of these sites, *Ancestry.co.uk* provides access to UK census records, military records, and births, marriages, and deaths indexes, in addition to interactive guides.
5. The event took place in the large exhibition space in the Olympia, London, 26–28 Feb. 2010, forming part of the “National History Show.”
6. Television programs were identified by 68.6 percent as an “extremely influential” factor in the increased popularity of family history in the UK and Ireland, with a further 28.6 percent describing them as “influential.”

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