

# Michael Ondaatje and the New Fiction Biographies

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One of those mysterious genre shifts has been taking place in recent fiction: serious writers are appropriating and transforming a form long considered subliterary, the fiction biography. Far from being popularized or sensationalized low-brow substitutes for scholarly biographies, these books are novels convincing and memorable in their own terms, in which the biographical elements come to seem nearly irrelevant. That fiction and modern biography should merge is probably less surprising than that the merger should have taken so long to happen, for the genres came into being at about the same time and out of a similar impulse. Like a novel, a biography is made up of many small details of ordinary life that the writer hopes to shape into a coherent whole; both forms aim not merely to inform the reader of the events of a life, but to simulate a life in such a way that the reader may share it. To both biographers and novelists, a subject often seems to present itself or declare itself through some irrational process, and to take possession of its writer in a near-mystical union. Flaubert felt that he had become Madame Bovary; similarly, Leon Edel describes the biographer as undergoing a sort of "alchemy of the spirit . . . becoming for awhile that other person, even while remaining himself."<sup>1</sup> Many a biographer claims to achieve an intuitive sympathy with the subject that can nearly "annihilate the centuries, the spaces, the deceptions of change, the opacity of death,"<sup>2</sup> and all insist on the necessity of imagination in the creation of a good biography, on the essential deadness of facts without that inspiring force.

The connections between the biographer and the fiction writer have become even more close in our century, when the principles of depth psychology revealed by Freud significantly expanded the biographer's task to include the rendering of "not only the public and private events of a life but its intimate existential and perceptive textures, all adding up to the whole sense

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Toronto: U of Toronto P. 1957) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (New York: Norton. 1965) 151.

of a person," a project that at least one biographer has termed "extravagant."<sup>3</sup> More and more, biographies have come to read like psychological novels; and once biographers had entered the domain of the novelist, it was inevitable that novelists would enter the domain of the biographer, for the novels written between the lines of modern biographies are usually as unsatisfactory as are fictionalized biographies that have accepted the obligations to objectivity, accuracy, and completeness that characterize a good biography. Chief among these obligations, of course, is faithfulness to factual truth; most conscientious biographers severely restrain the same elements of feeling, intuition, and alchemy that provide the direction—and, they would say, the life—of the interpretation. They aim, in their writing if not always in their thinking, to be dispassionate, to produce a narrative "calm and measured and judicial" (Edel 81). From this follows the abstracted and tentative language of many biographies. The biographer is obliged to inform us when something is missing from the record or cannot be explained and to propose or suggest rather than to present in most matters of private life. The effect is to reduce the reader's emotional involvement, just as the writer's has been restrained by reason, logic, and the rules of evidence. The problem, from the fiction writer's point of view, is not merely this cautious stance, for there are novels that proceed in the same tentative way—indeed, in which a narrator's uncertainty about the protagonist contributes to the impact of the novel. Though rarely dramatized, the relationship between a biographer and an enigmatic subject is not unlike that between Nick Carraway and Gatsby or Quentin Compson and Sutpen, and it can produce a similarly intriguing ambiguity. Many novels have the same objective, coolly evaluative stance (whether of an omniscient or a dramatized narrator) that one finds in a mainstream biography.

But the anti-fictional force of the biographer's historical conscience and scientific detachment is compounded by the obligation to trace a subject's progress from birth to death, an obligation which makes the typical biography more generalized and less shapely than a novel. Even biographers who tamper with chronology and use novelistic techniques of flashback and juxtaposition tend to accept both the necessity of presenting the whole life and the resulting necessity to summarize, select, and generalize in order to make that life intelligible as a single process; they will compress sixty years into six hundred pages. But not even a relatively uneventful year can be adequately treated, in a novelistic or psychological way, in ten pages. A novelist who

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Kaplan, "The 'Real Life'," in *Studies in Biography*, ed. Daniel Aaron (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1978) 2.

accepts the biographer's obligation to completeness is thus obliged to dilute the emotional and sensual intensity of the material.

Spurred by several notably successful challenges, such as Styron's *Nat Turner* and Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, to the assumption that a biographical novel should follow the same rules as a straight biography, a number of contemporary writers have been producing fiction biographies that are very good fiction indeed. They aspire not to fill the gaps in the biographical record with invented facts, but to overwhelm the biographical facts with the flow of imagined facts to which the former give rise. Skeptical about historical or biographical objectivity and generally distrustful of facts, they make large claims for fiction, both as a way of approaching truth and as an endeavour worthy in itself. The best of these writers overstep the boundaries of research and of reason, move right inside the heads of their subjects and the people around their subjects, and retain both the fascinations of fiction and the fascinations of biography.

Factual or historical truth does have a specific urgency that pure fiction cannot provide. Discussing "The New Biography," Woolf wrote that truth "stimulates the mind, which is endowed with a curious susceptibility in this direction, as no fiction, however artful or highly coloured, can stimulate it."<sup>4</sup> To Woolf, the most difficult artistic problem of the biographical novel is that invented facts and verifiable facts may destroy each other when combined, the verifiable facts discrediting the imagined ones and the imagined ones making the verifiable seem dull or incoherent.<sup>5</sup> The new fiction biographer solves this problem by creating a context in which the two sorts of facts are indistinguishable, serving both the stimulative function of the truth and the symbolic and evocative functions of fiction. Fact and fiction must be seamless, or at least simultaneous. The means to this end are myriad.

The most common first step is the step away from biographical time, away from the telling of a whole life. Typically, the fiction biography is limited to a crucial year or few years and thus may expand into realms where few facts will be available: the daily life, the inner life, the unrecorded experiences of the self. The fiction biographer also abandons the traditional biographical point of view—that of the omniscient narrator—in fa-

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 4: 229.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Art of Biography," in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, 1967) 4: 225.

vor of multiple narrators or an intimate first person, either of which simultaneously reduces literal belief and increases psychological intensity. For example, Frederick Busch's *The Mutual Friend* uses "voices" of Charles Dickens's tour manager, his wife, his housemaid, his mistress, and Dickens himself to present a complex, contradictory portrait of Dickens's world and of the man. Rhoda Lerman found herself able to approach Eleanor Roosevelt only after taking on Roosevelt's own voice, in a process she has described in a letter as "a form of madness."<sup>6</sup> Another common technique for subduing fact to the service of fiction is the use of a highly wrought, poetic language quite different from the language of fact. Some controlling metaphor or image is found, often from within the facts of the subjects' life, and then expanded and elaborated into a literary motif of the sort familiar in fiction but not in mainstream biography.

Finally, the fiction biographer is careful to establish both the factual basis for the account and its fictionality. Writers who have chosen an obscure subject tend to establish factuality by including pictures, documents, or explanatory prefaces; such procedures are, of course, unnecessary with a well-known subject. But whatever the subjects, the writers also establish the tentativeness of their interpretations through passages of fantasy or direct authorial intrusion, through conflicting perspectives on the subject, and in some cases through deliberate and easily-detectible lies, not the least of which are the detailed accounts of the subject's dreams, fantasies, and physical surroundings. Some discredit their accounts, or at least cast them into doubt, by metafictional devices. Thomas Gavin's *Kingkill* (New York: Random House, 1977), for example, begins with a chapter called "False Facts." His first-person narrator frequently refers to and quotes from the "distorting prism" of the journal of his protagonist Schlumberger. The narrator, we finally learn, is Schlumberger. Such devices create a context in which imagined fact and verifiable fact carry equal—and equally partial—authority, in which hunch and intuition mix indistinguishably with proven truth. Each fact or factoid must be treated as possibly true and becomes as stimulating as truth; but the explicit possibility that it is false protects the writer from charges of deception, and in fact makes categories of truth or falsity inapplicable.

These devices may be seen at work in a particularly intriguing example of the form by Michael Ondaatje, who made his first foray into biographical writing with the poetic biography *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*. In

<sup>6</sup> See Frederick Busch, *The Mutual Friend* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) and Rhoda Lerman, *Eleanor: A Novel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979).

1976, he won *Books in Canada's* award for the best first novel by a Canadian for *Coming Through Slaughter*, a fiction biography of Buddy Bolden, one of the legendary figures of early jazz. Though other jazzmen mention Bolden as a great innovator and one of the most popular musicians in New Orleans during his brief career, little is actually known about his life. A recent biography of Bolden by Donald Marquis is only 130 pages long, excluding appendices and bibliography. Despite exhaustive research, the book's two greatest contributions to knowledge of Bolden's life are negative: Marquis disproves the persistent legends that Bolden was a barber and edited a scandal sheet named *The Cricket*. Bolden's second wife, Nora, who was traced down in Waterloo, Iowa in 1942 by the indefatigable jazz researcher William Russell, denied both stories, and her denials were corroborated by other reliable sources and by the fact that no copy of a newspaper called *The Cricket*, edited by anyone, has ever been found. Other than these two facts, Marquis' research in old New Orleans phone books, police records, jazz archives, and newspaper morgues produced pitifully few rewards: a few family addresses, a few death certificates, the knowledge that Bolden worked for a time as a plasterer, the marriage certificate of a wedding he witnessed (and thus the only known copy of his signature), his commitment papers, and the only newspaper coverage of his legendary career: one-paragraph items in two different newspapers describing his first attack of insanity, during which he hit his mother over the head with a water pitcher. Even more than most, this biography is full of qualifiers, of possibly's and perhaps's, and despite its brevity is padded with contextual materials, as chapter and appendix titles reveal: "Family History and City Neighborhoods," "Places Bolden Played," "Bolden's Sidemen and Contemporaries," "The Music and Musicians after Bolden Left," "The Family Up-To-Date." Many of the chapters about Bolden himself are formed largely of quotations from the many contradictory accounts of the man and his music, some of which Marquis then disproves and others of which he questions.

How much less conclusive was the "thin sheaf of information"<sup>7</sup> available to Michael Ondaatje a few years before this biography appeared! A single photograph, of Bolden's band in 1905, and even that mysterious, since whichever way it is printed some of the band members appear to be holding their instruments backwards; a single page of facts, and even that full of question marks ("Born 1876?"), of blanks ("Hattie \_\_\_\_ had a son by him"), of uncertainties ("Other teachers were

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (New York: Norton, 1976) 134.

possibly . . .”), and, as it turns out, inaccuracies (132). In fact, certain details very important to Ondaatje’s interpretation of Bolden are either mistaken or simply and admittedly invented. Yet these inaccuracies do not discredit this book as they would a traditional biographical novel, for the author clearly establishes in the book itself that biographical accuracy is not his goal—and indeed, given the scarcity of information, is not even possible. The enormous gaps in the biographical record grant so much freedom for invention that one might expect Ondaatje to have retained at least the few facts available. But Ondaatje found even these few facts to be restrictive or irrelevant: “While I have used real names and characters and historical situations I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers,” he says in the acknowledgements that conclude the book. “There have been some date changes, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction.” By announcing but not specifying the changes, Ondaatje establishes that the purpose of the book is not to convey information about Buddy Bolden. Here he differs from other earlier fiction biographers like Yourcenar, who were careful to identify the false leads in their accounts, and thus to identify the more reliable information as well. He also differs from mainstream biographical novelists, who tend to insist that their novels are consistent with the historical record; in such books, the reader learns about the subject and about history—indeed, the purpose of many such books seems to be to make history fun for those people who would not find it interesting if taken straight. By contrast *Coming Through Slaughter* teaches very little about Bolden except that he existed. What we do learn about is Ondaatje’s version of Buddy Bolden, which openly contradicts the historical record as well as adds to it. Ondaatje describes the book as having “a totally mental landscape . . . a landscape of names and rumours. Somebody tells you a rumour and that becomes a truth”<sup>8</sup> The indefinite article is significant: a rumour becomes a truth, not *the* truth. It is one of several possible truths, each of which must be at least partially false.

The historical Buddy Bolden was born in 1877 in New Orleans and spent his youth there. He learned to play the trumpet around 1894 and became the first of the “Kings” of the trumpet in jazz, leading a highly successful career between 1900 and 1905. At about this same time, the odd little photographer E.J. Bellocq was taking his portraits of the Storyville prostitutes, though there is no reason to believe the two men ever met. Bolden had two common-law wives, Hattie Oliver and Nora Bass; when not in-

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Witten, “Billy, Buddy, and Mich ael,”  
*Books in Canada* 9 (1977): 9.

volved with these women, he lived with his mother and sister. In early 1906, he began to have psychotic episodes, brought on at least in part by heavy drinking; he was arrested for insanity in March and released shortly thereafter. His last job as a musician was a Labour Day parade that year; at some point, he dropped out of the parade, "either from exhaustion, or perhaps more likely, from some conduct that caused concerned musicians or friends to take him home."<sup>9</sup> About a week later, he was arrested for the second time; after his release, he spent several months just sitting around the neighborhood drinking. In March of 1907 he was again arrested, spent two months in the House of Detention, and was then committed to the state asylum at Jackson. He died there in 1931 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Holt Cemetery, New Orleans.

Ondaatje's novel begins in the spring of 1906, with occasional flashbacks to Bolden's life as barber and as editor of the scandal sheet *The Cricket*. Police Detective Webb (a fictional character), a friend of Bolden, learns from Nora that he has been missing for six months and sets out to find him. In his two-year-long private investigation, he talks to former Bolden band members such as Willie Cornish and to the photographer Bellocq, whom Nora blames for Bolden's disappearance. Eventually he finds Bolden at Shell Beach, where he has been living with Robin and Jaelin Brewitt (also fictional). Webb urges Bolden to return to New Orleans and to his career. Bolden spends a few weeks alone at Webb's cottage on Lake Pontchartrain, trying to escape the trap of fame that Webb has set for him; but finally he returns to New Orleans, and five day days later goes mad while playing in a parade in April 1907. In June he goes to the asylum, and here the novel essentially ends, except for one scene years later between Webb and Bella Cornish.

For all its inventions, the novel clearly and immediately establishes that it deals with a real person. The first page of the novel is the picture of the Bolden band, with Bolden identified, accompanied by a quotation from Bolden's friend Louis Jones describing his popularity. The first section of the book describes "his geography" as it appears today: "The various homes of Bolden, still here today, away from the recorded history . . . This is N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked" (Slaughter 10). Throughout the book are sections clearly set off from the fictional sections, referring to the historical evidence: quotations from interviews with old jazzmen; popular song titles of the time; descriptions of

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State U P, 1978) 117.

Bellocq's photographs; a list of a dozen band names, too exotic to be invented—the Diamond Stone Brass Band, the Old Excelsior Brass Band, Kid Allen's Father's Brass Band; many specific dates and addresses; a one-page resume of the facts of Bolden's life; an interview with Lionel Gremillion, chief administrator of East Louisiana State Hospital, and selections from his history of that institution; and transcripts of taped interviews with musician Frank Amacker.

Yet most of these factual items are undercut in one way or another. The real interviews are set up on the page in exactly the same way as imagined interviews, recognizably imagined because the language is poetical and the speakers are not listed under the interview credits on the copyright page. The photograph, we are told, "is not good or precise," but is the "only photograph that exists today of Bolden and the band" (66). The interview with Gremillion is frustratingly unspecific: "Wasn't much communication between whites and blacks here and so much information is difficult to find out. No black employees here" (137). Gremillion speculates that Bolden may have had an "endocrine problem" but can shed no real light on his madness. The selections from Gremillion's history of the hospital describe general conditions there, but include only two references to Bolden: the negative results on a Wasserman test, and the date of his death. And Frank Amacker, an old man with a failing memory, has little to say for Bolden's playing except that he was the loudest of the good trumpet players. Thus, the facts feel considerably less certain than the fiction, which proceeds by the flat assertions of most fiction: she did, he thought, he felt, she said.

But this certainty too is undercut, interrupted by shifts in point of view that continually catch the reader off-guard. The points of view include an omniscient researcher-author offering historical background and externalized descriptions of characters such as Bellocq; Buddy Bolden, sometimes in third person and sometimes in first person; detective Webb, in third person; the various first-person voices of the interviewed musicians; and finally, and most startling, the author speaking in his own voice, describing himself confronting the "desert of facts" that is Bolden's life, the elusiveness of the man, the "complete absence of him" from those places he frequented, and then the author's own identification with him: "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now."

The photograph moves and becomes a mirror.  
 When I read that he stood in front of mirrors and  
 attacked himself, there was the shock of memory.  
 For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade



cut into the cheeks and forehead, shaved hair.  
Defiling people we did not wish to be. (133)

The shock of remembering Bolden's activities as his own, and the immediately felt sense of "we-ness," seems to have given Ondaatje the freedom to create a Bolden out of "personal pieces of friends and fathers" and of himself. For to learn that one's own most private or extreme moments have been shared by another is to be encouraged to believe that the boundaries between people, the limits of selfhood, are not as impermeable as we assume. Ondaatje, speaking directly to Bolden, says he "Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body" (134). Thus the project of understanding another becomes equally the project of understanding oneself: one's present options, one's potential futures. This same sort of identification appears more briefly in *Billy the Kid*, in the poem that identifies the gunman's hands with the writer's hands: "and my fingers touch / the soft blue paper notebook / . . . I am here with the range for everything / corpuscle muscle hair / hands that need the rub of metal"<sup>10</sup> and also in the uncaptioned childhood photo of Ondaatje—Michael the Kid—that ends the book.

Such identification, at first the motivation for the biographical quest, becomes its technique as well, a route to knowledge, and it is when treating the most intimate and crucial experiences of Bolden that Ondaatje uses the first person: the vital setting of the barber shop, the love-making with Robin Brewitt, the violent fight with Tom Pickett, the long retrospective soliloquy at Webb's cabin, the final parade, and the trip to the asylum—after which the narrative fades into the distance of third person accounts by peripheral characters and of historical records, which say so little. It is as if Ondaatje were unable or unwilling to violate the privacy that he sees as the motivation of the "madness," whether real or feigned. But he seems to have felt that the first person, the assumption of identity with his subject, was necessary if the most impossible parts of the account were to be convincing, and so the most purely invented sections are told in the most strongly assertive form: I did, I thought, I felt. When first reading the novel, one feels these shifts into first person only because of the increased intensity they bring; but at the end of the book, one is forced to rethink all of those passages, for the last paragraph of the novel is one in which the "I" could be either Bolden or Ondaatje:

<sup>10</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970) 72.

I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes. (156)

Twenty pages earlier, Ondaatje had emphasized the connections of age and emotion between Bolden and himself. Here, the setting suggests Bolden in the asylum, as do certain images associated with Bolden throughout the novel. But the tone is more lucid than the Bolden of the last previous first-person section: "Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me, I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth" (140). This confusion of author and subject, coming at the end of the book, casts much of it into doubt even as a fictional account of Buddy Bolden's life, for many of the first person experiences attributed to Bolden are anonymous enough, unconnected enough to the specifics of his career, his friends or his family, that they could as easily be read as "personal pieces" of Ondaatje himself.

Many gratuitous factoids connect Ondaatje and Bolden. Some connections are obvious only to readers who can recognize certain of Ondaatje's favorite poetic motifs and images when they occur in Bolden's mind. But even the few details about Ondaatje available to anyone who sees the dustjacket of the book tie him to his version of Bolden. The jacket blurb states that he "lives with his wife . . . and children and dogs in Toronto"; the photo shows a man in a collarless shirt. Now, though the only pictures of Bolden show him in a stiff dress collar, Ondaatje says that "Nora's habit of biting the collars of his shirts made him eventually buy them collarless" (49). And though Bolden's son from his first marriage was living with his first wife, and though he had only one child by his second wife, Ondaatje has both children living with Nora and emphasizes Bolden's role as a father: he walks his children to school every day, giving "himself completely to them during the walk, no barriers as they walked down the washed empty streets one on either side, their thin cool hands each holding onto a finger of his" (13); he automatically goes in to comfort a crying child at night; and he has recurrent nightmares of his children dying. According to Marquis, the historical Bolden was an "idol to the children in the area" and "was not star-struck and always had time to talk" (95), but there is little evidence that his own children got much attention—indeed, after a few years he no longer provided any support for his son—or that he would be so obsessed with their safety. And the fictional Bolden shares Ondaatje's "well-known

love of dogs,"<sup>11</sup> picking up a stray when he is staying at Webb's cabin; the historical accounts mention no dogs in any context.

However, these private jokes are only minor versions of the manipulation of facts that happens on a much larger scale throughout the novel, in the service of Ondaatje's central understanding of Bolden as an extreme case of the problems facing any artist in this century (Witten 10), the understanding that drew him to Bolden initially: "Why did my sense stop at you? There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade' . . . you like a weatherbird arcing round in the middle of your life to exact opposites and burning your brains out . . . There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame" (134). Already at this point, at least as he described it, Ondaatje had begun to conceptualize the life, to perceive Bolden as the victim of a game Ondaatje himself was resisting. His desire to illustrate an artist's conflicts between improvisation and order, in life as in music, and between the purity of private art and the intoxication of public art, determine which facts he selected, which he "expanded and polished," which he distorted, and which he invented.

Ondaatje's use of those persistent legends—Bolden as barber and as scandal sheet editor—is intricate and fascinating; from them he draws several central images and an idea of Bolden's music not really suggested by the historical descriptions of his style. Since these legends, which Bolden's biographer goes to such pains to disprove, are stated as fact in most earlier sources on Bolden, Ondaatje presumably took them at face value as facts with good fictional resonances. Ironically, these suggestive "facts" were already fictions, the first based on Bolden's habit of hanging around barber shops and his close friendship with barber Louis Jones, and the second based possibly on the existence of another Bolden who was something of a gossip. The N. Joseph Shaving Parlor on the corner of First and Liberty in Bolden's old neighborhood, which Ondaatje identifies as the place where Bolden "probably worked," is Bolden's place of employment in the novel. Actually, the shop was owned by Bolden's friend Jones at the time; Nelson Joseph and his brother did not take over the place until about the time that Bolden went to the asylum. But in *Coming Through Slaughter*, this very ordinary shop becomes a magical environment that both enthralls and enslaves Bolden, providing him with material for *The Cricket* and for his music, but also restricting him into its routine.

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Scobie, "Coming Through Slaughter: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12 (1978): 10.

Ondaatje sees Bolden as caught in the impossible trap of trying to maintain a music that was always new, formless except for the form of the mood behind it. Before his disappearance, he keeps a life that is finely balanced, finding the "certainties he loathed and needed" (78) in Nora's "delicate rules and ceremonies" (15), while exercising his anarchic improvisational impulses in the barber shop and through the cornet. To his clients in the shaving parlor, who come with a need for the solace of confession, Bolden "freely gave bizarre advice just to see what would happen . . . Days later furious men would rush in demanding to speak to Bolden," who "instead of accepting guilt" would "quickly suggest variations . . . He loved it. His mind became the street" (42). As he works on his clients, Bolden savors their powerlessness and their trust of him, knowing that he could at any time, with a slight movement of the hand, drop burning soap in a man's eye or cut his throat. Surrounded by mirrors, green plants, Audobon wallpaper and the ice fogging the windows of the "only cool place in the First and Liberty region" (47), he balances chaos and control, and gathers the stories that he will print in *The Cricket* and play on his cornet, "his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change . . . Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (43).

The barbershop also furnishes several of the book's recurrent images, most importantly the "tin-bladed fan, turning like a giant knife all day above my head. So you can never relax and stretch up" (47). Though providing comfort, it also provides a limit, cramps Bolden's style. Stephen Scobie has pointed out a possible pun here on the "fan" who adores the musician but forces him to maintain a single rigid posture (Scobie 13). But the fan is also related to Bolden's own self-destructive impulses, and it finally provides the image to describe the "suiciding" of Bolden's mind: "Bolden's hand going up into the air in agony. His brain driving it up into the path of the circling fan" (136). The other image furnished by the barbershop comes from the blocks of ice that melt all day long in the windows of N. Joseph's to cool the room; this coolness is repeated in the Brewitt's house and in reference to Robin's hair, breath and touch—a private version of the anarchy he courted at N. Joseph's since he and the Brewitts have "no order" among them—and represents the evanescence of human relationship and human endeavor. In their last time together, Bolden thinks that he and Robin "give each other a performance, the wound of ice. We imagine audiences and the audiences are each other again and again in the future . . . We follow each other into the future, as if now, at the last moment we try to memorize the face a movement we will never want to forget. As if everything in the world is the history of ice" (87). Ice,

of course, has no history that can be traced; only the history of melting and evaporation, leaving no sign that it existed—just as in “Holtz cemetery the high water table conveniently takes the flesh away in six months”(134) so that the “history” even of Bolden’s body has become the history of ice.

*The Cricket*, as Ondaatje imagines it, is wholly unedited, equally respecting “stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies” (24). It contains excessive references to death—freak accidents, murders of passion—reflecting Bolden’s obsession with all the ways that death can surprise a person. But its method is to fix the chaotic flow around him. It was, he thinks in retrospect, “my diary too, and everybody else’s” (113), briefly making sense of situations that would have changed again by the next issue of the paper. After his disappearance, his plunge into silence and privacy and a life without theories, Bolden sees the newspaper as only “the craziness I left. Cricket noises and Cricket music for that is what we are when watched by people bigger than us” (113-114). Bolden has become bigger than he was, by escaping the cramped room of fame, escaping the false sense of his own significance and returning to the eternally unpredictable, eternally improvised, edge of music and of experience.

It is not difficult to see how these two legends came together in Ondaatje’s mind as clues to the man’s personality: a barbershop, one of the most sociable places imaginable, where men would sit and gossip as they waited their turns; a broadsheet made up of gossip and scandal, of public improvisations upon improvised daily lives, the lives as formless and fluid as most lives, except those in novels and biographies. Together these two legends provided one-half of a life; the other half, silence, isolation, anonymity in the asylum where no one knows, or knows anything about, anyone else. To represent the opposing forces that finally snap Bolden in the parade, Ondaatje arranges a constellation of characters, some real, some partly real, some completely imagined, whose gravitational power draws and repels Bolden. On the side of order and ceremony, his wife Nora Bass, who provides for a time the secure base for his improvisations, and Webb, the detective who likes to play with magnets, who never loses anything, who tempts Buddy back into the world after his self-imposed exile. On the side of silence and chaos: Bellocq, the artist who scorns fame, who tempts Buddy into a “mystic privacy” (64) and “out of the world of audiences” (91); and the Brewitts, “The silent ones. Post music. After ambition” (39), who help Buddy to recover the “fear of certainty” that had been the essence of his jazz.

In creating the Brewitts and Webb, Ondaatje is doing nothing very different from what most fiction writers do when they create characters, representing different ways of thinking or of living, who act as foils or doubles for the protagonist. Even his version of Nora Bass is almost entirely imagined, and suited to the fictional purposes as much as any figure tailor-made to the author's desires by the author's mind. But his use of E.J. Bellocq is more intriguing, because it is in so many ways *not* an imaginary construct, but reconcilable with the historical evidence (again rather sketchy) about Bellocq himself. Bellocq is the only major historical figure in the novel other than Bolden. Like Bolden, he is an enigmatic figure, though their career progressions are reversed: Bolden, popular in his own time, is now generally unknown; Bellocq, an obscure commercial photographer during his lifetime, has now become respected through the exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art and through Louis Malle's film *Pretty Baby*, which was loosely based on the mood and subject of Bellocq's private pictures: the women in the Storyville brothels. Ondaatje's "Acknowledgements" list Bellocq's pictures as "an inspiration of mood and character," but he gives no other direct clues to the "Private and fictional magnets" that "drew him and Bolden together" (158) in the fictional world, except perhaps his description of Bellocq's photos. He sees in them a kind of intimacy or privacy: the photographer alone in the room with the woman, so silently attentive that he forces her into a passing grace or beauty, waiting until "she would become self-conscious towards him and the camera and her status, embarrassed at just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads she imagined she could take as a child" (54). In contrast to the almost compulsively sociable Bolden, Bellocq seems to have preferred to be left alone and to create his art alone; he showed his pictures only to the few people he liked and trusted.

He and Bolden, then, are opposites that must have come together in Ondaatje's mind, and so come together in the novel. The author was faced with a puzzle: an outgoing, idolized, creative young man goes insane at the peak of his career, and withdraws into the silence, anonymity, and stasis of an asylum, "dropped into amber" (134) for the remaining 25 years of his life. The process of unpuzzling the puzzle is analogous to working a mathematical formula in which certain quantities and relationships are given and others must be deduced. To Ondaatje, Bellocq was a key, an alternate artistic and personal style, a functional version of the silence that Bolden preserved in his madness. Bellocq's privacy and self-sufficiency free Bolden from the false sense of his own significance that is encouraged by public admiration. So short that "he was the only one who could

stretch up in the barber shop and not get hit by the fan," he offers "mole comfort, mole deceit" (91). And Bolden follows Bellocq's lead, finding that mole comfort with the Brewitts. Others have traced the intricate imagistic motifs by which Ondaatje establishes Bellocq's conceptual relationships to the others in the constellation of characters, so I will not repeat them here.<sup>12</sup> But it is worth emphasizing that in Bellocq, as in Bolden himself, Ondaatje found a historical character so suggestive and complex that a name-change would have seemed a sham, even an insult to that person. And this despite the changes Ondaatje does make in the historical record—in particular a fiery suicide for a man who died naturally some 35 years later than this fictional death in which he sought something "to clasp him into a certainty" (67).

As an inspiration of "mood and character," Bellocq's photographs probably inspired Ondaatje's version of Nora Bass, who in real life was a good Baptist, "lively and attractive" according to Marquis, but in the novel is a former prostitute, one of Bellocq's subjects, who yet had "managed to save delicate rules and ceremonies for herself" (15). The most striking of Bellocq's portraits are of women who could fit this description, women who had salvaged a certain dignity and reserve. As a group, the pictures are startlingly contemporary, despite the archaic costumes. Like Ondaatje's novel, these pictures do not force awareness of the time elapsed since these people were alive. Neither the novel nor the pictures suggest that dead people are easier to understand than live ones, and so they preserve what Marguerite Yourcenar called the mystery that "before being that of history must have been that of life itself" (344)<sup>13</sup> and they avoid oversimplifying their subjects into types—whether the type of the whore or the type of the mad artist. Bellocq did this by allowing each woman simply to be herself; Ondaatje does it by allowing his character to be in some ways his (Ondaatje's) own self, attributing to him entirely contemporary recognizable sensations and ambiguities rather than recognizably historical ones. The book, in other words, has no period flavor, at least not in its fictional sections: items of furniture, of clothing, of architecture, are simply chairs, shirts, cottages, and this reinforces the sense of identity between author and protagonist and finally between reader and protagonist. Only the barber shop is archaic. The "mood" that Bellocq's photographs suggested must have been that of the generally shabby and simple settings of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Scobie, "Coming Through Slaughter: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webs," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12 (1978): 8-23. and Sam Solecki, "Making and Destroying: Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Extremist Art," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 12 (1978): 24-47.

<sup>13</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs d'Hadrien* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958).

pictures and of the novel; many of Bellocq's models are posed against a white or black background, a wall or a cloth hung over a line, and this monochromaticism is repeated in the "white room" and the "black room" that describe states of mind for Bolden.

Bellocq's pictures are "windows" (59) for Bolden, offering escape from the room of self and of sameness that reputation made "narrower and narrower, till you were crawling on your own back, full of your own echoes" (86). To a modern viewer, these pictures are windows out of the present time, offering a seemingly unbiased view of the anonymous women living in 1912, and thus of that world of 1912 which seems so distant (and feels distant in a novel like Doctorow's *Ragtime*, which exaggerates and exploits period details) from 1986. Oddly enough, that particular description of Bellocq's pictures probably comes from another historical detail to which Ondaatje several times refers: according to Louis Jones, Bolden used to urge his band members to play louder, in order to lure the audience away from the neighboring park where another band was playing, by saying, "Come on, put your hands through the windows. Put your trombone out there. I'm going to call my children home" (Marquis 62). In this poetic phrase, Ondaatje found one of his major poetic motifs, or at least the legitimization for his use of personally significant images to describe the experience of another person: the complicated imagistic structure of rooms, corners, windows, and mirrors.

According to a ward attendant at the state hospital, Bolden used to go and stand by the window when he played his horn with the hospital band (Marquis 128).

It seems that even the smallest details of true life, when allowed to roll around in a writer's head, begin to form wholes, aesthetically satisfying, intellectually provocative, yet still tied to the historical reality from which the details came. Even in a case like this where the details were so few, it was necessary to select, to focus upon limited bits of the legend. A different writer might have concentrated on Bolden's legendary popularity with women; another might have given more space to the musical career; another might have described the conflict between Bolden and his less unconventional wife, who eventually left him as a result of his erratic behaviour; another might have examined the madness itself. Ondaatje chose details, seemingly less dramatic, which appealed to him and which came together into a complete aesthetic structure. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that those details which came together chose Ondaatje. Whatever the "private and fictional magnets" that drew



him to his subject and to these particular facets of his subject, Ondaatje did not allow his artistic impulses either to be intimidated by the authority of truth, or to simulate historical truth. It is the mixture of factoid and fact, of absolutely convincing psychological development and yet absolute refusal to claim real knowledge, that makes *Coming Through Slaughter* so successful and offers a way out of the dilemma of the writer drawn to a historical subject, who wishes neither to mislead readers about the accuracy of the account nor to undervalue the truth of fiction.

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