

Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing

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Robert Caro's new book, *Working*, is a sort of self-help manual for historians. Packed with thought-provoking insights and practical advice, it is sure to delight and inspire scholars, from eager students to consummate professionals, looking for a master class in history. Because if anyone has a claim to produce such a thing, it is certainly Caro, considered the dean of American political historians, and tireless biographer of U.S. president Lyndon Johnson and New York 'master builder' Robert Moses.

Undoubtedly one of the biggest names in non-fiction publishing (all his books have been *New York Times* bestsellers), Robert Caro has also enjoyed a rarefied degree of critical acclaim. He has been awarded two Pulitzer Prizes, two National Book Awards, three National Book Critics Circle Awards, the Society of American Historians' Francis Parkman Prize, the H.L. Mencken Award, the Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Humanities Medal – and, despite the laundry list, that is still far from exhaustive.

Caro rose to fame in 1974 with *The Power Broker*, a magisterial biography of Robert Moses – the American Haussmann who oversaw the urban planning of the New York City area – now more famous for being the subject of *The Power Broker* than for the (many) highways, bridges and buildings he actually constructed. Following this tour-de-force, a rare instance of hard-hitting political history couched as riveting biography, Caro set his sights on an American statesman whose brilliance and depravity made him pure Shakespeare material: Lyndon Johnson, President of the United States from 1963 to 1969.

The result of this bold pursuit is *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, a series in five volumes, the first of which was published in 1982 with a new volume dropping every decade or so (the fifth and final one has yet to be published), making Caro the non-fiction equivalent of Donna Tartt. An author whose books, few and far between and always door-stoppers, are anticipated with a giddiness usually more associated with pop albums than anything in the literary publishing world, let alone 1000-page long discourses on the nature and mechanisms of political power. As *Salon* once pointed out, 'In some wonky circles, the release of a new volume [of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*] is heralded like the Summer of Love release of "Sgt. Pepper's".' [1] Reading Robert Caro has become something of a badge of honour and a 'humble brag' amongst the intelligentsia – though the burning question endures of exactly how many Caro fans have actually ploughed

through the 5000 pages of prose he has published so far. (Disclaimer: It would be the zenith of hypocrisy for me to pretend I have, or to even allow it implied; I have only read *The Power Broker* and sections of *The Path to Power*, the opening volume of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.)

But perhaps the most notable, and intriguing, of Caro readerships is the very people he writes about: scheming politicians. The American historian has emerged as a kind of guru of political power, a Machiavelli for the age of technocracy. His books are on the shelf of any self-respecting politico with a craving for fame. He can count two former U.S. Presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, as aficionados. Many more in Washington D.C. treat his *Years of Lyndon Johnson* as a how-to guide on navigating the bureaucratic meanderings of Congress, and riding its back-stabbing plots all the way to victory. (A sign of Caro's influence: In the Netflix version of *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood, the fictional politician portrayed by Kevin Spacey, has a volume of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* on his desk.) Across the pond, the very real British Conservative Party could feasibly double as a Robert Caro book club. William Hague, George Osborne, Michael Howard, Ed Vaizey, Daniel Hannan, and Michael Gove, among others, have voiced their admiration for Caro – with Gove perhaps the biggest fan of all: he chose to read the entire third volume of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* while waiting for his wife to give birth.^[2]

Working – Caro's new book – probably won't generate such feverish ardour from politicians. But it should fascinate historians as well as journalists, and anyone looking for tips to writing non-fiction and biography. Caro explains in the introduction that his book is 'not a full-scale memoir' (he is actually planning one), but rather a collection of 'scattered, almost random glimpses of a few encounters I've had while doing the research on the Moses and Johnson biographies, encounters both with documents and with witnesses' (p. xv). *Working* is made up of 15 pieces, some previously published in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*, others original. Written in a relaxed and informal, albeit elegant tone, they shine a light on Caro's 'method, process, means' (p. xxvi). Meaning: how he researches primary sources, how he conducts interviews, how he conceptualises a book, how he plans structure and weaves narrative with argument, how he writes engaging prose. Caro's aim in sharing the tricks of his trade – one he certainly succeeds in achieving – is to 'share or pass along [the lessons learned in his career] for whatever they're worth to other writers and to readers interested in non-fiction' (pp. xv–xvi).

And reading *Working*, it becomes readily apparent, obvious even, that Caro would have made an outstanding lecturer and teacher. (He actually considered a career in academia, but dropped out of the English PhD programme at Rutgers to become a reporter.) Caro's style is didactic and accessible to all. He uses personal anecdotes, such as stories from research trips or interviews, to impart lessons. The result makes for both an entertaining read (particularly for practitioners, who will see themselves in Caro's anecdotes) and a precious educational resource. This is not a book to read just once, but instead a manual to browse, time and again, for guidance and stimulus.

Working is structured in a way that is easy to navigate. The first three sections focus on Caro's memories as a reporter, and his experiences writing *The Power Broker* and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. The remaining four sections highlight what Caro feels are key features of the historian's craft: the conduct of interviews, the writing process itself, the importance of conveying mood, location and characters (in other words establishing drama) in the writing of history, and the need to anchor political history in the culture of its time.

Early on in the book, while recounting his days as a New York investigative journalist, Caro reveals the simple secret to successful archival research: "Turn every page. Never assume anything. Turn every goddamned page" (p. 11). It is a maxim he repeats like a mantra throughout the book; one that, he explains, served him numerous times in his career – especially when he did not feel like doing so, disappointed or daunted by a collection of papers. Caro contends that the folders that appear the least relevant can actually yield the most riches.

Eager to illustrate this point, he shares an anecdote from his time conducting research at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library. He was looking for information on Johnson's activities in October 1940. Then a Texas

Congressman, Caro had identified this timeframe as a key juncture in Johnson's political development. Before that month, he was a mere congressman. After that month, he was a legislative power player. So, what happened? Caro had hunches: there was a midterm election in November 1940, and Johnson must have somewhat raised his profile by performing a key role in the Democratic Party's campaign strategy. But it was all murky. A former Johnson aide told Caro it had something to do with 'money, kid, money', before warning the historian that 'you're never going to be able to write about that because you're never going to find anything in writing' (p. 89). But Caro did – by turning every page. At the Johnson Library, he had been poring over the 'House Papers' collection without success. But then, he spotted a vaguely-named collection titled 'Selected Names'. He decided to examine it, expecting very little. He remembers: 'I sat there turning the pages, every page, thinking I was just wasting days of my life. And then, suddenly, as I lifted yet another innocuous letter to put it aside, the next document was ... a Western Union telegram form, turned brown during the decades since it had been sent—on October 19, 1940' (pp. 90–1). As it turned out, this telegram offered clear-cut evidence that Johnson had received money from Texas oilmen. He then offered this bounty to fellow Democratic congressmen running for re-election, all in exchange for steadfast loyalty and political favours down the line. This was a major discovery. Yet again, Caro experienced the wisdom of turning every page.

Working brims with real-life parables of this kind. A particularly powerful, heart-wrenching instance, is the time Caro took Sam Johnson, Lyndon's younger brother, to the Johnson Boyhood Home. It was a museum that had been recreated to look exactly like the childhood home of Lyndon and Sam Johnson. Caro asked Sam to sit at the dining table and re-enact family dinners. Sam struggled to do so. Long stretches of silence ensued, but Caro knew that, in an interview, silence is not the enemy. On the contrary, it is 'the weapon, silence and people's need to fill it ... let silence do its work' (p. 137). And it did. Caro was eventually able to get Sam Johnson to share stories he had never told before. These stories revealed a neurotic, tragic childhood, for Sam and his older brother; one hitherto never suspected.

But beyond being a how-to guide on researching and writing history, *Working* is also an earnest, sincere plea for a lively kind of historical writing that is more than 'a collection of facts.' Caro argues that 'the base of all history, of course, is the facts, it's always the facts, and you have to do your best to get them, and get them right. But once you have gotten as many of them as possible, it's also of real importance to enable the reader to see in his mind the places in which the book's facts are located' (p. 141).

That is what Caro refers to as creating 'a sense of place,' something he laments is a staple of fiction writing, yet is all too often overlooked in non-fiction. He explains that it is paramount to help 'the reader to visualize the physical setting in which a book's action is occurring: to see it clearly enough, in sufficient detail, so that feels as if he himself were present while the action is still occurring' (p. 141). For Caro, this is a way to imbue history with emotion, and make the reader relate to the book's subjects. It is also, he suggests, a way to emphasise the arguments one is making. By ensuring the reader is emotionally involved in the narrative, any and all arguments subsequently carry greater weight. He contends, for instance, that 'to really show political power, you ha[ve] to show the effect of the power on the powerless', meaning 'the consequences of power – the consequences of government, really – on the lives of its citizens, for good and for ill' (p. 61). This advice might be more relevant to the genre of biographical history Caro writes than to more historiographical approaches. But it is certainly astute, and always worth bearing in mind.

Moreover, Caro's commitment to writing relatable history actually point to his own aspirations as a historian. To understand how growing up on a farm isolated from society shaped Lyndon Johnson, Caro went 'method' and became a sort of literary Daniel-Day Lewis. He spent two days, alone, in the hills where young Johnson had lived. He writes that 'you find out things that you could never realize unless you did something like that' (p. 146). This is but one example of the lengths to which Caro has gone to capture on the page not just what happened in the past, but also what it *felt* like. He emerges from *Working* a historian with a novelist's heart, interested in the psychology of political power every bit as much as he is by its process or consequences. With *The Power Broker* and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, Caro has endeavoured to produce non-fiction equivalents to the Great American Novel – dazzling works that use story, in his case

the real-life stories of Robert Moses or Lyndon Johnson, to say something deeper about America and its contradictions.

With *Working*, we get an invaluable glimpse inside Robert Caro's mind. His ideas, memories, musings, and tips are all of the highest calibre. They should please the general reader. And they should make any historian more thoughtful, especially postgraduates.

[1] Erik Nelson, 'Robert Caro's bloated LBJ biography', *Salon*, 7 May 2012 <
https://www.salon.com/2012/05/07/robert_caros_bloated_lbj_biography/ [2]> [accessed 7 May 2019].

[2] Daniel Janes, 'Why our politicians love Robert Caro', *New Statesman*, 25 May 2012 <
<https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2012/05/why-our-politicians-love-robert-caro> [3]>
[accessed 7 May 2019].

Other reviews:

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/books/review-working-robert-caro.html> [4]

Times Literary Supplement

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/review-working-robert-caro/> [5]

Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/> [6]

Financial Times

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Guardian

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/304057>

[2] https://www.salon.com/2012/05/07/robert_caros_bloated_lbj_biography/

[3] <https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2012/05/why-our-politicians-love-robert-caro>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/books/review-working-robert-caro.html>

[5] <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/review-working-robert-caro/>

[6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=/outlook/biographer-robert-caro-on-his-own-lifes-work/2019/05/17/5d1915c4-6cee-11e9-8f44-e8d8bb1df986_story.html%3F

[7] <https://www.ft.com/content/82b5b3b2-546d-11e9-8b71-f5b0066105fe>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/21/robert-caro-interview-working-lbj-more-facts-you-collect-closer-to-the-truth>