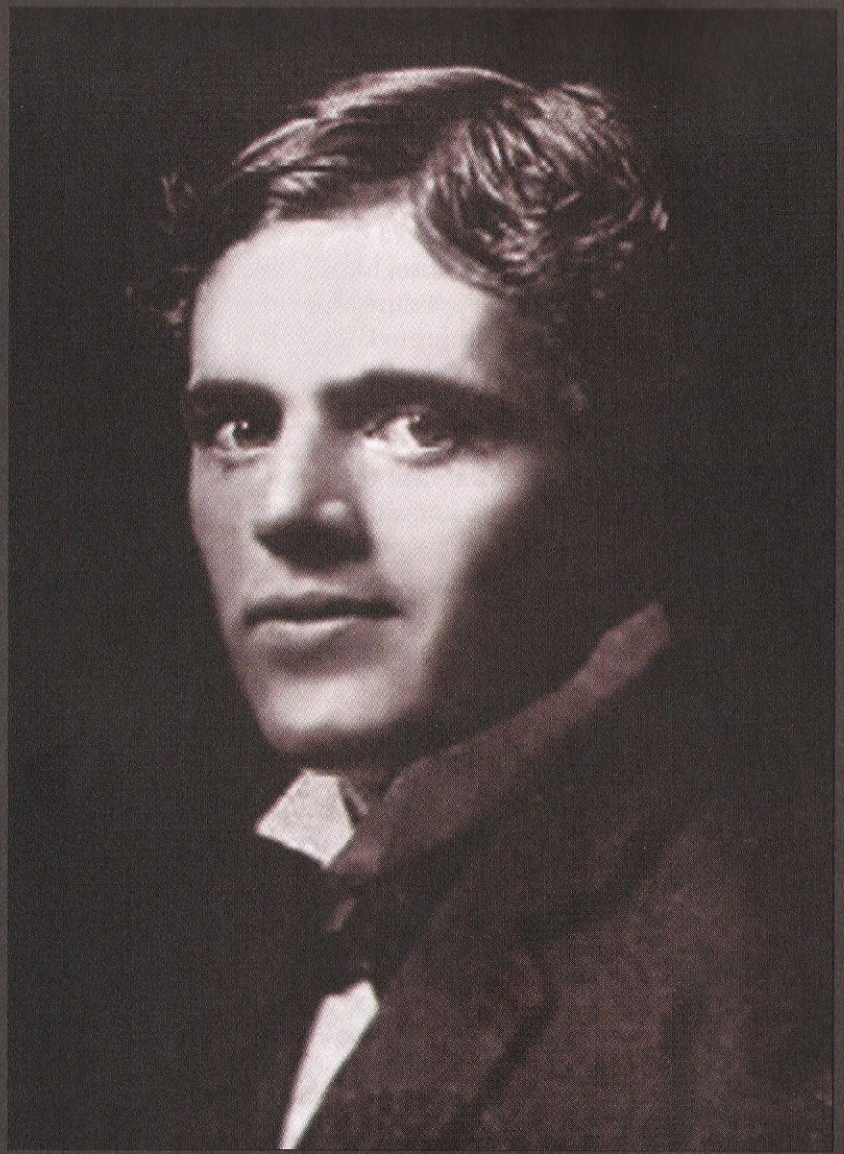

Jack London became one of America's most successful short story writers by fictionalizing his own experiences, and then becoming like a character in his own fiction. He insisted that, "I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet."

CHARLOTTE GRAY

The Biography Trust-busters

The issues of trust are ones that face every biographer. Novelists often scoff at a biographer's claim to truth-telling. John Updike called biographies "novels with indexes." More recently, Ian McEwan described the compression of a complex personality into a single portrait as a ridiculous conceit – as if "a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages – bottled, like homemade chutney." Such comments reflect the way that a biographer's stock-in-trade, which is the construction of a framework for a life, rarely acknowledges the messy, day-to-day reality of that life.

I AM WRITING a non-fiction book about the 1896–1899 Klondike Gold Rush. This project has thrust me right into the middle of every biographer's dilemma – I want to write a trustworthy story, but whom can I trust? And can readers trust me?

My challenge is that dozens of the stampeders published memoirs about crawling up the brutally steep Chilkoot Pass, and suffering through bitter winters on the creeks in lonely ice-lined tents and cabins. Many suffered scurvy, dysentery, or frostbite: almost none of them struck gold. But most of these old warriors wrote their memoirs twenty or forty years after the events they describe, and in the intervening years, the Gold Rush acquired a unique glitter in their memories. Gone are the mud, lice, monotonous diet of beans and bacon, and air so cold that it hurt to breathe. Instead, the memoirists recalled their Klondike days as the Making of Them. The adventure had become the defining experience of their lives.

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I trace the stories of six particular individuals (including Jack London and Sam Steele of the Mounties) who were part of the stampede to Dawson City, the centre of the Yukon gold fields. My bookshelves in Ottawa sag with out-of-print memoirs, in which I have chased references to my six subjects. It has been an exasperating pursuit: whenever I compare accounts, the inaccuracies are horrendous. I know all about gamblers with names like Swiftwater Bill, hookers known as the Oregon Mare or Diamond Tooth Gertie, and the famous dance girl sisters named Jacqueline and Rosalinde (better known as Vaseline and Glycerine). But many names are confused, dates wildly wrong, and the reality of Dawson City in its heyday is forgotten. None of these memoirs mentions that in 1898, when Dawson was a town of 25,000 people, there were no sewers, only three public toilets, and regular summer epidemics of typhoid and dysentery. Today, most of us cannot imagine that level of filth and over-crowding, unless we watch television footage from a horrendous displaced persons camp in the underdeveloped world. Yet 110 years ago, 100,000 people yearned to reach squalid, smelly Dawson.

So what is the truth? Was the Klondike Gold Rush the greatest adventure ever told? Or was it a hideous ordeal? In particular, how much self-deception did the stampeders (and my six subjects) employ? Can I trust them, and can my readers trust my judgements?

THE issues of trust are ones that face every biographer. Novelists often scoff at a biographer's claim to truth-telling. John Updike called biographies "novels with indexes." More recently, Ian McEwan described the compression of a complex personality into a single portrait as a ridiculous conceit – as if "a whole life could be contained by a few hundred pages – bottled, like homemade chutney." Such comments reflect the way that a biographer's stock-in-trade, which is the construction of a framework for a life, rarely acknowledges the messy, day-to-day reality of that life. The accumulation of events, thoughts, decisions, conversations, and actions in each day, let alone a year, is overwhelming for most of us, particularly since we have no idea of the future. Barely a sliver of what we do or think or feel gets recorded, even with the prevalence of cameras today – security or cell phone. The record that does exist is incomplete, or distorted, or captures states of mind that are transient. Then along comes a biographer who manipulates the material to provide a narrative arc in which appropriate facts and milestones are

Dancer and entertainer Kathleen Eloise Rockwell, best known as "Klondike Kate," became a great favourite among the miners of Dawson City during the Klondike Gold Rush. Not surprisingly, dozens of other "Klondike Kates" from the same period are also recorded.

Nellie McClung hoped to make a life as a novelist, but was drawn to a different story.

plucked out of available material and shaped into a tale with a beginning, middle, and end. The selection and interpretation of facts and events are determined by the knowledge of what the subject will later achieve. But as a child, John A. Macdonald had no particular ambition to be prime minister, and as a young woman the suffragette Nellie McClung wanted to make her mark as a novelist, not a political activist.

Biographers have always manipulated material. All they and their readers can hope for is that the character they create on paper, out of the bits and pieces they assemble, bears some resemblance to the person who actually lived and died. But sometimes the story they construct is pulled out of shape by hunger for a new angle. Literary critic Louis Menand calls the belief that there must be a new angle "the Rosebud assumption" – the hypothesis that the real truth about a person involves the thing that is least known to others. A biographer may be so eager for the hitherto unknown "Rosebud moment" that she or he attaches more importance to a letter hidden in an old trunk, or an entry in a diary, than the public testimony of dozens of friends and colleagues. The Rosebud moment is the pivotal experience that shapes all future life events. That is why biographers get hysterical when we hear about personal papers being thrown on a bonfire – either by the secretive subject himself, as Henry James was wont to do, or by a relative. As Nellie McClung's biographer, I still rage against Nellie's daughter for burning all her mother's scrapbooks and letters. There goes the Rosebud moment!

Yet why should a long-lost letter or diary entry explain anything? People lie in letters all the time. They use diaries to moan, vent and polish their side of the story, and they change their minds from day to day about some aspects of their lives. But a biographer comes along and picks out one pivotal moment which then acquires an unstoppable explanatory force.

Today, "truth" in biography has become an even more slippery commodity. The notion of a master narrative – the "truth" – lies bleeding on the floor, after successive assaults from Freudians, feminists, modernists, deconstructionists, post-colonialists, and postmodernists. At the same time, the shape of biographies has become much more diverse. Thanks to the architecture of websites, we are getting used to the idea that we can have more choice in how we consume information: we don't need to follow a linear path. Readers still want narrative, but not necessarily the conventional arc that begins with a baby and ends with a corpse. So biographers are starting to ask questions ... *Why follow chronology? What is the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity? Can I put myself in the picture? Can I dissolve the barriers between past and present – and should I?* This is both liberating and dangerous, as facts are constantly sliced and diced into preconceived packages without much attention to psychological development or social context.

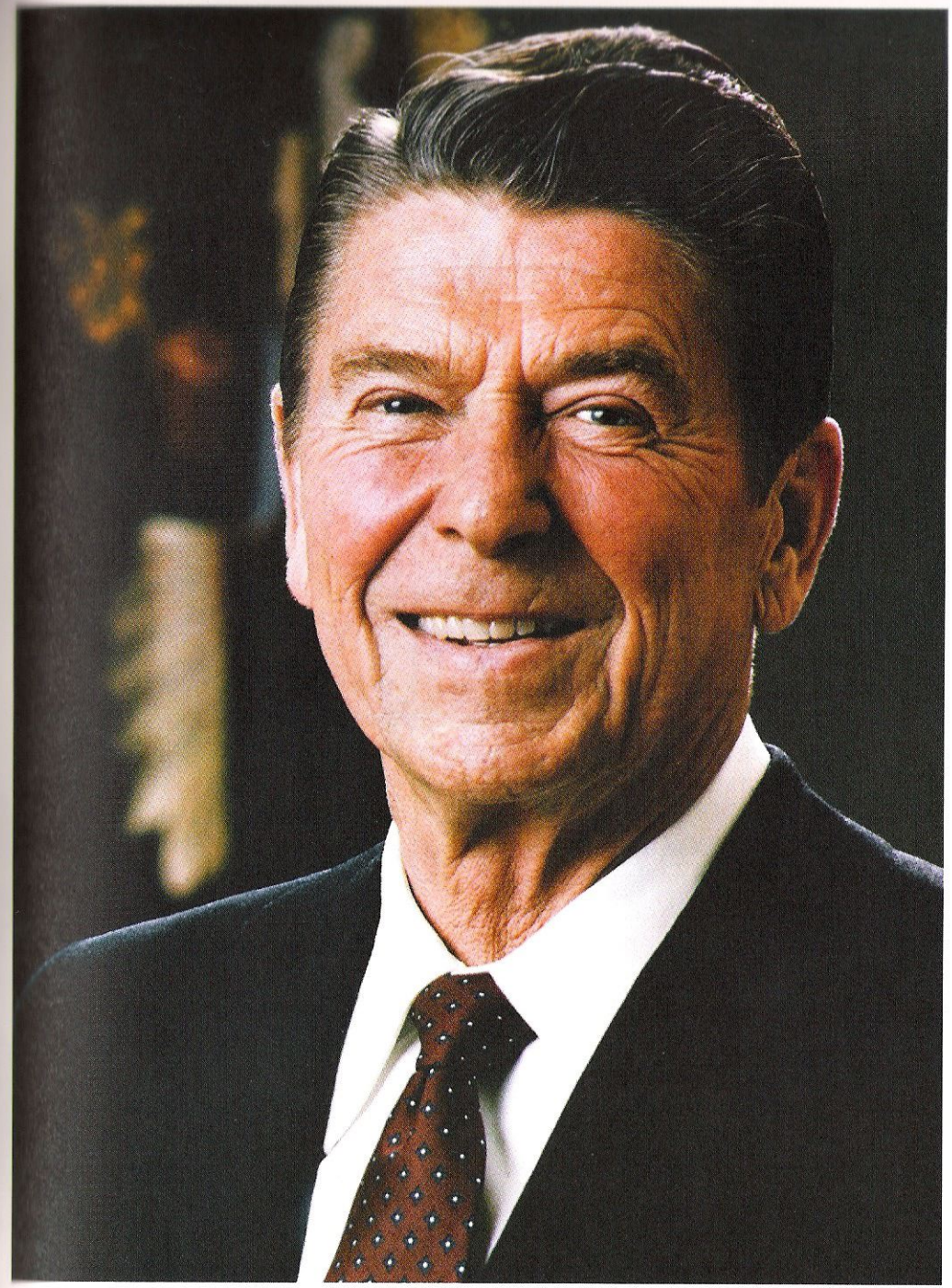
And then there is "truthiness." This weasel word was coined by American comedian Stephen Colbert to describe the trend in current politics and popular culture to be a little loosey goosey with the facts.

It is the exact opposite of "trustworthiness." "Truthiness" involves a bare minimum of facts, and a great deal of exaggeration, imagination, interpretation – and that's truthiness at its best. At its worst, it can involve barefaced lies. The best-known example of truthiness is American author James Frey, who made his name in 2003 with a memoir called *A Million Little Pieces.* The book described how Frey supposedly became, in his twenties, a convict, an alcoholic, and a drug abuser. It was a searing read – well written and dramatic. Frey was invited onto Oprah Winfrey's television program, the greatest shop window in the world, and the book topped the *New York Times* bestseller charts. Then it turned out that, in the interests of spicing up his bleak experiences, the author had exaggerated or invented various episodes in the book. He claimed, for instance, to have spent 39 days in jail: in fact, he had spent five hours. Frey defended himself by claiming that the facts didn't matter so much as the "emotional truth." But in the book he had claimed that all the events he wrote about had really happened, and they hadn't.

Frey had wanted to tell a good story – and that is what motivates the best biographers, too. In *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, Lytton Strachey was one of the first biographers to use the techniques of a fiction writer to engage his readers: flashbacks, close-ups, varying points of view and narrative tropes. Since then, the amount of creativity brought to bear in the voice, style, organization, and storytelling armature of non-fiction has expanded as fast as the size and sophistication of its readership. The boundary between creative non-fiction and straight invention has almost melted away. Contemporary biographers are constantly flirting with truthiness.

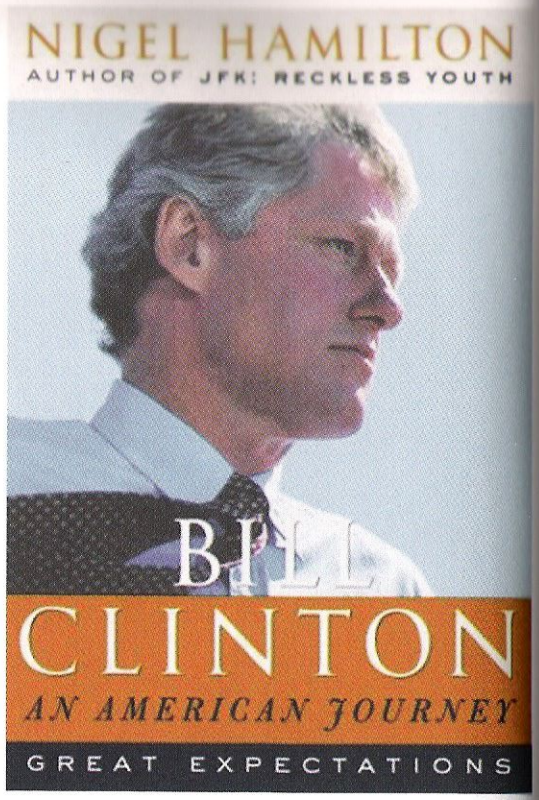
But where does legitimate imagining end and invention begin? How far can one take mild speculation, or imaginative projection, in the interests of readability?

IN 1999, American writer Edmund Morris published a biography of Ronald Reagan. In a previous biography, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt,* published in 1980, the author successfully used quasi-fictional techniques, such as imagining the young Roosevelt's state of mind at certain moments. He dispensed with the careful signals employed by over-scrupulous biographers, such as words like "He *probably* thought about …" or "One can imagine …" The book, which won a Pulitzer Prize, persuaded the former president and his advisers to select Morris to write Reagan's official biography.



Ronald Reagan picked up the nickname "Dutch" very early in life, and "the Gipper" in Hollywood. Despite his open, engaging manner, he has proved surprisingly opaque to biographers.

But when Morris came to Reagan, who was still alive at the time, he found that Reagan eluded him when he tried to write about him in a conventional non-fiction narrative. So the author developed a very unorthodox device – he put himself in the biography, as a fictional narrator called Dutch.



The full title of the final book was *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan,* and critics panned it. If one of the characters in this volume of so-called non-fiction was fictional, what else was invented? Maybe, to use James Frey's defence, Morris had got to the "emotional truth" of President Reagan. But his readers had expected a factual account of real life, and they had found a fictional version. They felt betrayed.

Yet among students of biography there was a different reaction. British biographer Nigel Hamilton, who is currently working on a three-volume biography of President Clinton, describes *Dutch* as "a radical extension of the postmodern biographer's more playful relationship with his audience." Hamilton, author of *Biography: A Brief History,* says that Morris's mistake was not to start making things up, but to reject the expectations of the audience for an authorized biography. This readership did not want postmodern tricks.

Had there already been an official biography, argues Hamilton, and Morris had then come along with his more risky version, people would not have been nearly so upset. In fact, Morris's biography might even have been praised for its originality, its copious insight, its wit, and its sheer descriptive narrative power. Because everybody knows by now that there are elements of truthiness in every biography, so biographers should keep pushing the boundaries.

In the biographies I have written, I have never invented dialogue, characters, or events. Up to now, I have stayed well within the bounds of non-fiction, even as I play with different shapes and forms for the stories I tell. But Hamilton's argument is persuasive. Biographers today find themselves competing for readers with novelists. Casting aside that old device, a *roman à clef,* contemporary novelists construct their central characters out of once-living flesh. Far more people will get to know Thomas Cromwell through Hilary Mantel's Booker-winning novel *Wolf Hall* than through the numerous factual biographies of Henry VIII's chief adviser. Annabel Lyon has introduced a whole new audience to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, thanks to her Giller-nominated novel, *The Golden Mean.* As the overlap between fiction and non-fiction expands, and readers recognize the pliability of memory and narrative, biographers are tempted to seize back some turf. But biography remains a non-fiction genre, so its practitioners must sharpen their creative skills while retaining readers' trust.

ALL THOSE nostalgic memoirs by Gold Rush veterans about their Klondike adventures certainly shook my trust in them. They may have caught the "emotional truth" of their adventures, but like the silty, deceptive, and unreliable currents of the Yukon River itself, their accounts are only one stream in the larger landscape of history. If I want my readers to trust me, I know I must mention both Vaseline and Glycerine *and* the stench of sewage.