HERMIONE LEE

... talks about enthusing readers, and bad behaviour in biography

Dame Hermione Lee is the outgoing President of Wolfson College, and Professor of English Literature, University of Oxford. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2001.

Tell me a bit about your background. Did the home you grew up in foster an early interest in literature?

Yes, it did. My sister and I had a privileged London childhood. My father, who was a GP, loves music and was a good cellist, so it was a very musical home and we went to a lot of opera and concerts. My mother, who came from a working-class background and had left school at 15, was a self-educated woman of high intelligence and was a wide and avid reader. She had worked briefly for Jonathan Cape during the War, and she gave me the run of her astonishing library of books. I was reading very early – Thomas Hardy from the age of eight. I think I did a great deal of my life's reading between the ages of eight and seventeen, when I went to Oxford University.

It was a very bookish childhood. Every week my mother and I went to the Buckingham Palace Road Public Library in Victoria and got my books out, and I can vividly remember the point at which I was allowed to graduate from the children's library to the adult library.

Did you feel that you were better read than your school contemporaries?

When I was very young, I think I was aware that I was reading different kinds of books, which slightly took my teachers aback. I can remember boastfully telling my teacher, when I was about 10, that I was reading *Jude the Obscure*. She clearly thought this was a bad idea. But I was a slightly odd, inward child. At home – we didn't have television – I was reading, reading all the time.

Do you think that gave you a more mature outlook?

No, not at all. I think I lived in a fantasy world. I was completely unable to come to terms with reality.

You were to take this interest in literature further by going on to study at university. Was that inevitable?

I suppose it felt inevitable. I went to a series of schools: the Lycée in London when I was very young; and then the City of London School for Girls, which was then a direct-grant grammar school. Then, for the sixth form, I went to an excellent private school, called Queen's College in Harley Street, which had been founded by Frederick Denison Maurice for middle-class girls to become governesses, and which had been Katherine Mansfield's school. It had a very enlightened headteacher who pushed the A-level course into one year and gave us a wide-reading cultural course in the first year. So I took the Oxford entrance early.

I had a fantasy about wanting to act, but I was clearly not cut out for it. It did always seem pretty

obvious that I was more of an academic and an English literature person.

At the time, I loved going to university early, and being in fully-paid employment by the time I was 22. But looking back, I think I might have done better to have taken a year out and grown up a bit more.

You studied as an undergraduate and graduate at Oxford.

Yes, I did the BPhil. I was in the last generation of academics that did not have a DPhil.

Your first academic post was at the College of William & Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia. How did that come about?

There was a scheme that the Woodrow Wilson Foundation set up in liaison with the English Speaking Union, to plant young teachers in American universities for a year. I suppose it was a brain exchange. I went for an interview straight out of the BPhil. I remember being asked what I would do if a gunman came into the class (this was 1969): I said I would hide under the desk. But they still took me on.

I got an instructorship at William & Mary, which meant teaching a sophomore survey course, 'From Beowulf to Beckett', and a freshman course. I was plunged in at the deep end, because these were students very unlike the Oxford undergraduates I had taught when I did the BPhil. It was good training for me to teach big classes.

Is there any causal relationship here with your undoubted interest in American literature?

Yes, there is. I had not read much American literature when I had done my massive reading as a child and teenager. But when I came back to England in summer 1971, there was a job in the University of Liverpool – these were the days when there were lots of academic jobs going – and I was asked to teach American literature. I did a rapid crash course in Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Whitman and Poe, and it went on from there. That was lucky for me.

What is the particular interest for you in this American pioneer literature?

The people I have written about have been women novelists of the late 19th and early 20th century, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton. I am also very drawn to writers like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

I am interested in the unpredictability of the forms they use. And I am interested in the transatlantic cultural relationship these writers have with other countries. I am interested in the relationship between the 'brave new world' and the old world, in the old ideas of American innocence and of being looked to as an exemplary nation – and how chronically distorted and destroyed that idea has become. I am interested in those pioneering adventure stories, which can be women's stories. There are things in common between *Moby-Dick* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, if you like – not stylistically, but in the idea of fronting the world. And I am fascinated by that theme in Cather, with her stories of the first-generation immigrants pouring into America (stories that we need to be reminded of now), and how they face that new world, how they deal with it and make a shape out of it.

I have a passion for the big 19th-century American writers. I am in love with Emily Dickinson, I have come, late, to admiring Whitman, and I am interested in Melville. I'm addicted to contemporary North American writing, from Roth and Updike to Tyler and Ford. But I would really like to spend the rest of my life writing about Henry James.

I feel rather shocked that British readers do not know writers like Willa Cather as much as I would want them to.

Do you think you bring a perspective to your studies of those American authors that an American critic would not have?

I think the impulse has been the other way, which is to feel rather shocked that British readers do not know writers like Willa Cather, Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty as much as I would want them to. It's even the case with Edith Wharton, who is a big name, but people tend to know only about five books out of a huge opus. So it's more 'Read this, and this is why I love it.' I want to bring them more readers.

On the other hand, I don't think that the scholars who work on Willa Cather in Nebraska all their lives, putting out definitive editions of her work, are particularly interested in what an English academic has to say about her.

While you have certainly written about male authors, the authors you seem to have focused on are women: Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Penelope Fitzgerald. Do you have a particular interest in women writers like these?

Yes, I do. But I am not single minded about that. I wrote a short book about Philip Roth,[1] for instance, and did quite a lot of work on his books

1 Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (Methuen, 1982; reissued in Routledge Revivals, 2010).

Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bowen and Penelope Fitzgerald have all been subjects of books by Hermione Lee.
PHOTOS: EDWARD STEICHEN, CONDE NAST COLLECTION (CATHER); JANE BOWN © GUARDIAN NEWS & MEDIA LTD 2017 (BOWEN, FITZGERALD)

at one time, informally reading for him and interviewing him for the *Paris Review*.[2]

So is it entirely coincidental?

No, it is not coincidental. I am, of course, deeply interested in women writers. However, I think that Elizabeth Bowen (who is a great novelist and essayist), Fitzgerald, Cather and Wharton were reluctant to identify themselves with particular groups or causes. Woolf, who obviously was an enormously influential 20th-century feminist, did not want actually to describe herself as a feminist, because she was worried how that would define her. I think I am interested in them primarily as great writers and extraordinary individuals, rather than going to them because they are women.

I am currently writing a biography of Tom Stoppard, so that is a change.

You published your first book on the novels of Virginia Woolf 40 years ago this year.[3] Has the study of women writers changed since then?

Yes, hugely. I look back on that book with slight embarrassment because I had a very male-dominated training at Oxford. I tried to make myself sound very formal and grown-up and Latinate when I was writing that book, and I was still a bit defensive about writing about her. I had a stuffy male tutor at Oxford who said, 'Of course, Woolf and Forster are minor novelists, nothing to be compared to Conrad and Eliot, if you are talking about modernism.' That was in the early 1970s. I think I chose to write about her because of that, but I still felt that I had to be slightly defensive about it.

The study of women writers has been completely transformed in every way since then – whether in biography, literary criticism or cultural theory. That 40 years has seen a huge change. Now I can happily and confidently spend four or five years writing a book about Penelope Fitzgerald.[4] If I had tried to do that earlier on, in the 1980s when she was still writing, it would have been thought of as very much a minority interest. Things have changed.

The immense work that has been done by many feminist critics, political movers-and-shakers, and cultural critics has completely altered the way we can write about women in the last 40 years. And the fights that other women have fought on behalf of women like me have obviously helped me in my career. For instance, I was the first female Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford, and I am the first woman President of Wolfson College, Oxford. There are many trail-blazers before me who I owe that to.

For Woolf, Bowen, Cather, Wharton and Fitzgerald, you have published both biographies and editions – sometimes the edition first, sometimes the biography. What is the interplay between the two?

Very frequently, if you are thinking about a person's work and life, you are looking at unpublished material and at uncollected work. With Bowen, for instance, there had been no editions of her essays after her lifetime. I did a collection of her essays and letters called *The Mulberry Tree*, which was published just after my book on her, and which came out of my work on her.[5] She is a brilliant essayist, and it was pleasing to put some of those pieces together. Virago published that in 1986. Probably no other publisher would have done so then. Virago was very important for me, as for so many other women readers and writers.

With Cather, again, I wanted people to read her short stories, and there was no current edition of the short stories in the UK at that time, and Virago published my edition of them.[6]

I also did two volumes of short stories by women in the 1980s, called *The Secret Self*, which was published by Everyman.[7] That was fabulous to do, because it enabled me to introduce all kinds of writers, such as Jean Stafford and Grace Paley.

My husband John Barnard, who is the editor of Keats, is the real thing, a scholarly literary editor. When we talk about our respective work, I am tremendously aware of what a close relationship there is between editing and biography. You cannot write biography if people have not edited the materials.

2. Philip Roth, interviewed by Hermione Lee (The Art of Fiction, No. 84), *Paris Review*, 93 (Fall 1984).
3. Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1977; reissued in Routledge Revivals, 2010).
4. Hermione Lee, Penelope Fitzgerald: *A Life* (Chatto & Windus, 2013).
5. Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (1981); revised edition as *Elizabeth Bowen* (Vintage, 1999). *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Hermione Lee (1986; reissued by Vintage, 1999).
6. Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (Virago, 1989; reissued 1996). *The Short Stories of Willa Cather*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee (Virago, 1989).
7. *The Secret Self 1: Short Stories by Women*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee (J.M. Dent, 1987; revised edition, 1991). *The Secret Self 2: Short Stories by Women*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee (J.M. Dent, 1987; revised edition, 1991).

You start your biography of Virginia Woolf [8] with her quote 'My God, how does one write a Biography?' You have written on this subject, including in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. [9] In there, as one of the many characterisations of how biography can be written, you draw the distinction between 'autopsy' and 'portrait'.

I am glad you have quoted that line by Woolf. One of the reasons for writing the Woolf biography was that I was fascinated by her own deep scepticism about biographical processes. She wrote an enormous amount about that, including within her fiction. In *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando* she is saying 'How do you know another person?' Therefore I couldn't set out to write a standard cradle-to-grave biography: it would have been a bit of an affront to her. I wanted to build in the questions she was asking about how a life is written. And from that I got very interested in those questions of life-writing. I run a life-writing centre at Wolfson College,[10] and I have taught life-writing courses. (By life-writing, I mean biography, autobiography, letters, diaries – these genres overlap with each other.)

Autopsy, yes. There is a kind of biographical process that is, necessarily, cutting into the dead corpse, however ghoulish that can seem. You are as ruthlessly as possible trying to dissect and analyse the nature of the life.

The other approach is more akin to portraiture: to see how the person looked from the outside, how they affected and influenced people, what their friendships were like, how they were one thing to one person and another thing to another person. I think you have get at both inside and outside if you can.

For me, the approach to the interior life is also via the subject's writing. Because I am a literary biographer, and I come out of literary criticism, I deal with the relation of the life to the work. I would not write a biography of someone who was not a writer.

You have quoted the line that 'We all live out narratives in our lives'.[11] Do you think that our narratives are already there to be revealed, or are they constructed by biographers?

There is another quote to add to that, from Roy Foster, the great Irish historian and biographer of Yeats, who taught with me on my life-writing course. At the start of his biography of Yeats he says, 'We do not, alas, live our lives in themes, but day by day.'[12] This was in contrast to the way I constructed my Virginia Woolf biography through themes; in fact I think it was part of a friendly argument with that approach.

This idea of themes and narratives in a life, that somehow a life's shape can always be discerned, is something that I have mixed feelings about. Yes, we all have a story, and we are unravelling our own story from ourselves like a spider making its own web, as we go along. But nobody's life is necessarily a predictable story. And people's lives are not consistent. We all have more than one self, as Woolf says in *Orlando*. You have other selves than the person who is sitting here interviewing me.

I think that biography has to be watchful of making life seem too predictable, or determinist, or shaped, or ordered. Biographies go through fashions. There used to be a fashion for making the study run smoothly and look definitive – 'this leads to this leads to this.' I think life-stories are more bitty and piecemeal.

And life is also very repetitive, so biography often has to make a story out of repetition. We all do the same things when we go to work, day in day out, but that is often not very interesting to write about. On the other hand, you have to give a sense of the chunks of people's lives where they are doing much the same thing.

So there is a tension between the muddle and repetition and fragmentariness of a life, and the desire of the biographer to turn it into story narrative.

When, as in the case of Virginia Woolf, you have a very important, much-read woman writer who kills herself, there is a powerful desire to make the story move towards that point. You see that also in the life of Sylvia Plath – perhaps even more, because she was so much younger. It becomes all about the suicide. I sometimes ask people who haven't read Woolf how old they think she was when she killed herself. Very often they will guess that she was in her 40s; and when I tell them that she was 59, they are often surprised. The film *The Hours* did a lot of damage in that respect. It was not a *very* long life, but it was a long-*ish* life, and not all of that life was taken up in thinking about whether she was going to kill herself the

8. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (Chatto & Windus, 1996). This biography won the British Academy's Rose Mary Crawshay Prize in 1997.

9. Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

10. Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/oclw).

11. Lee, Biography: *A Very Short Introduction*, p. 104.

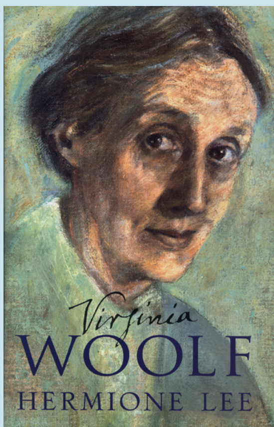
12. R.F. Foster, *W.B Yeats: A Life*, Volume 1, *The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xxvii. Professor Roy Foster was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1989.

next day or not – far from it. So one of my motives in writing about Virginia Woolf was to get away from the determinist sense of a story that had to end that way.

Creative people want to be judged by their work rather than by their lives. You have quoted Janet Malcolm's views on 'the voyeurism and busybodyism' of biographers in this respect.[13] How do you find an appropriate balance?

The biography of Penelope Fitzgerald was a very interesting case. I knew her a little bit, and I had interviewed her more than once. Her family executor asked me to do her biography, and I was delighted, because I think she is a genius. But she was also very private, very secretive, a bit of a liar. There is a haunting novel she wrote about Moscow just before the Revolution, called *The Beginning of Spring*. People would say to her, 'Surely you know Russia well. You must have spent many years there.' Sometimes she would say, 'Yes, yes, I have been there very often,' and other times she would say, 'No, I have never been there in my life,' depending on what mood she was in. The truth was she had been there for one week on a package tour, with one of her daughters. I love all of that: she didn't want people to know, she wanted to keep her secrets. There were lots of things about Fitzgerald that I never found out.

But you have to push against that privacy, even if it's a privacy that you yourself would want to keep. In a sense, you have to be like the Janet Malcolm image of the burglar ransacking the drawers or the publishing scoundrel in *The Aspern Papers*. You have got to be ruthless. But I also think one should be ethical, and treat one's subject truthfully, but with respect. That sounds weak, as if you are going to be kowtowing to your subject, but I think there should be some dignity in biography.



Where you have a subject about whom biographies have already been written, how do you decide, 'You know what, I think there is a gap there'?

The books on Bowen, Cather and Wharton I chose to do for that reason. But the biographies of Woolf and Fitzgerald came at me; I was asked to do them. With Woolf I thought at first, 'This is completely ridiculous. Why on earth would I? How could I?' Then I was asked again, and so I thought, 'Well, perhaps it *is* the right time, and perhaps I could try.'

I started work on it in 1990. It was a time when there had been a concentration on her madness, on childhood sexual abuse – Woolf as a victim. She is one of those figures who keeps pace with the psychoanalytical movements of the time. I wanted to insist on her as a hardworking professional, as a political realist, as someone who was in touch with her time, and not some doolally, cardigan-wearing, eccentric elitist, talking to herself on the downs. So I was writing against some previous versions.

Also, Quentin Bell (who was very generous to me) had written the family version, the story of his brilliant, mad aunt. It was a very funny and beautiful book, but it was a deeply unpolitical version of her. So I was writing a bit against that too.

In the case of Edith Wharton, the big Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of her by R.W.B. Lewis was tremendously American-focused. This is a person who left her country and lived abroad for a large part of her life – though the subject of her writing was still America. I wanted to place her more in Europe, in Paris, and I began my book there.[14]

I wanted to insist on Virginia Woolf as a hardworking professional, not some doolally, cardigan-wearing elitist.

With Penelope Fitzgerald, I was the first to write her biography. So almost all the personal sources of material that I was using I was seeing before anyone else (except perhaps the family): her student marked-up essays, or her annotated books, some of which had been rescued from the river when the barge that she lived on sank in the Thames. It's moving to hold these crinkled copies with her writing on them. That is a different kind of responsibility from writing on a much-biographised figure.

And you have also been able to talk to people who knew your subjects.

All of my subjects have been recent enough for that to be possible. There were just a few very old people left to talk to about Edith Wharton – Sybille Bedford, wonderfully gossipy – but obviously I had the least contact of that kind with her.

13. Lee, Biography: *A Very Short Introduction*, p. 95.

14. Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (Chatto & Windus, 2007).

With Woolf, when I started, a lot of the people in that last generation – Stephen Spender, Frances Partridge, Quentin Bell, Angelica Garnett, Noel Annan, Dadie Rylands – were all alive. They had been telling their stories for 50 years, and you knew that the minute you left the house they were ringing each other up to say 'She doesn't seem too bad.' However, the point was to get the tone, rather than any new information.

With Fitzgerald, people were talking for the first time, and a lot of them were quite old. I find that the older people they are – in their 80s and 90s – the easier it is to talk to them. If they want to talk, they will just talk – often on the phone, where they don't have to do the whole business of making you a cup of tea – and they will say quite frank things. Obviously, everybody misremembers. But you are going for *how* they talk about a person, not so much facts.

By contrast, I am talking to a lot of people at the moment who are not in their old age, they are busy, in their prime, in the middle of their lives. Quite often they can't remember dates when things happened, but that doesn't matter. I just want to know what they think about my subject.

Witnesses are fascinating, and always unreliable. They misremember like mad. And sometimes they will want to edge themselves into the foreground of the picture.

There are stories about Penelope Fitzgerald cheating at cards with her five-year-old grandson – because she absolutely had to win.

You have a nice sentence in your Woolf biography, where you talk about interviewing people who knew her: 'I often found how impertinent it was to reduce other people's long histories to their moments of knowledge of this one famous person, as though the rest of their lives counted for nothing.' Have there been people whom you almost wished you could pursue in their own right, to bring them more centre-stage?

All the time. I am having to do it at the moment when I talk to friends and colleagues of Stoppard. These are mostly astonishing, very talented, brilliant people in their own lives, and I am just asking them to tell this little bit of it. You have to try not to deviate, but it's hard.

Being used as a witness is just beginning to happen to me. People have started to ask me about the generation I have known, for example for biographies of Brian Moore and Angela Carter. Now it's my turn to have that moment of, 'Hang on, what about *my* life?'

In your acknowledgement note for your *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*, you start with: 'I am grateful to the British Academy for a personal research grant in 1987 which enabled me to visit Nebraska.' How important is it to visit places that feature in the biographies?

A key book for me has been Richard Holmes' *Footsteps*, that romantic account of his following Robert Louis Stevenson – with a hat instead of a donkey. I am full of admiration for biographers' quests. Edmund Gordon's recent biography of Angela Carter is very impressive in that way: he has been everywhere.

When a writer is so deeply imbued with a sense of place – as Cather is – you have to go and spend some time there. I didn't know the mid-west beforehand. John and I went to the Mesa Verde, which is at the heart of *The Professor's House*. I spent some time in her home town, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

For Elizabeth Bowen, I needed to be in County Cork, to look at that field where Bowen's Court once stood.

It's about colour and landscape and environment. Of course, everything will have changed. You go to New York to look for Edith Wharton's Gilded Age buildings: but pretty much every building directly associated with her is either gone or very changed. Still, I had a year in New York writing that biography, at the Cullman Center in the New York Public Library, which was invaluable to me.

So I am a great believer in seeing the places. I have just been to Zlín in the Czech Republic, where Tom Stoppard was born.

Do you have to like the subject of the biography?

You have to like their work, and then you hope you will like the person.

But quite often you run into objectionable things about them, and I am interested in the way biographers deal with their own emotions about their subjects' bad behaviour. When you are working on Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton, what do you do when they say or do awful things? We all know about Woolf's snobbery, her occasional bouts of hatefulness, and her treachery to her friends. All one can say about it is that she was as acutely aware of it as any biographer could ever be.

Willa Cather was a hard nut to crack, because she was a very reticent, rather stony person in public, and while I was writing about her it felt like climbing up a rock face. So while I hugely admire her work, I didn't find myself warming to her.

Penelope Fitzgerald was a very complex, elusive person, and again I didn't always warm to what I learnt about her behaviour. There are stories about her cheating at cards with her five-year-old grandson, or cheating at cards with her husband while she was sitting by his deathbed in the

hospital – because she absolutely had to win. It is funny, but also hair-raising. You have to tell everything, including the bad things.

Lucy Hughes-Hallet's life of Gabriele d'Annunzio, *The Pike*, is a very good case-in-point, on a different historical scale, about awful behaviour. She is very good on objectivity and not making judgements.

Who do you think of as the readers of your biographies?

It's an essential question, but a complicated one. In teaching, reviewing and book writing, I have always tried to write the same language that I would speak. I think I am a refugee from critical theory, in that I felt uneasy about a technical, professional language of critical studies that was not accessible, and so I have never been adept at employing it. I have always wanted these to be very accessible books that could be read by people who wanted to find out about these writers, who perhaps did not have any previous knowledge of them.

There were many times, especially writing about Woolf, where I would think: do I really have to tell this story again? – for instance about her friendship with Vita – everybody knows this! Then you have to think: no, there is more than one audience for this. There are the people who are going to the biography because they already know the story, and they want to see how it is going to be retold and whether they will find out anything new. There are the people who come to it because they love the books and want to find out more about the person. Then there are people who might just have a general interest, and who don't know the story at all. So you have to imagine all of those audiences.

One of the benefits of being a Fellow of the British Academy is that in due course the Academy will publish a Biographical Memoir – an extended obituary – of you. Are you more conscious of the traces you are leaving of how your own life, career and work might be construed?

I try never to think about it. The *Paris Review* has started to 'do' biographers, and in an edition a couple of years ago they profiled Michael Holroyd, and me.[15] It was the first prolonged interview I had done (with a very good interviewer), and I thought, 'Oh my God, I am writing my own obituary.'

I don't think that I have earned immortality in the way that I feel real, first-order creative writers – like the people I have written about – deserve immortality. I think biography is a second-order activity, as far as the immortality stakes are concerned.

If people do ever think about me, I would like to be judged by the different but connected aspects of my work. I have taught since I was 22, and I have supervised a lot of graduate students who are now out there as professional academics, and I would love my reputation to be in their hands, as it were. I have done a lot of journalism and reviewing. And I did a book programme in the 1980s for Channel 4, when it used to be an educational channel, and I interviewed most of the writers who were producing books over about six years. That was important for me, and I would like it to be remembered in its cultural context – when Britain used to have serious arts programmes.

All of that work over 45 years or so connects, I hope, through a desire to enthuse other readers with my own discoveries and literary passions.

Tell us more about the biography of Tom Stoppard you are working on.

I am having an exciting time thinking about his plays and working through his big archive in Texas. And I am talking to a lot of people. There is an astonishing range of work, and it is fascinating for me to be working on a dramatist – not a novelist – partly because it is not so linear – one book at a time. In any given year of his life, there have been an amazing number of things going on at once. Also, his texts are not finalised. I sat in on some of the rehearsals for the brilliant new 50th-anniversary production by David Leveaux of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Old Vic. I was struck by the fact that most of the actors weren't born when the first production took place, and yet there is the writer still sitting in the room, responding to questions about the text, and indeed changing it. Stoppard often says that theatre is an event, not a text. People have their precious copies of *Arcadia* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* which they have studied at school, and which are classics of the 20th century. And yet the author is completely open about saying to the actors and the director in rehearsal: 'Do you want to shorten that line a bit?' or, 'Shall we put a bit more Shakespeare in there?'

I like to think of biography as something that is open-ended. That's inevitable in the case of writing about someone who is alive. This is the first time I have ever done that. In 50 years' time, someone may write a completely different book about him. So mine will be a provisional biography, but I hope it will have immediacy.

Hermione Lee was interviewed by James Rivington.

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15. Hermione Lee, interviewed by Louisa Thomas (*The Art of Biography*, No. 4), *Paris Review*, 205 (Summer 2013).