



## Writing a biography

### Biography - the eye of the beholder

It might sound obvious, but it is helpful to remember that a biography is written by a biographer. In other words, people who write biographies have their own attitude and bias towards the people about whom they are writing. The amount and nature of the information available to them will vary according to when and in what circumstances they are writing the life story. Also, a biographer may be researching and writing from a particular critical or cultural point of view. It is quite likely, therefore, that you may read different accounts and interpretations of the same person's life.

Write about a person you admire or who has made a big impression on you. Here you have some ideas:

- Describe the person (personality, appearance...)
- Write about important aspects of his/her life.
- Your first impression when you met/ heard of him or her
- Things that you have in common
- Describe an adventure/anecdote about him/her.
- Describe your relationship with him/her.



### Camera Woman

**Margaret Bourke-White** was a unique heroine of the camera. She was the first woman industrial photographer of any note. Responsible for the first cover of *Life* magazine in 1936, she was an intrepid photojournalist who, in her time, covered the poverty of the Deep South, the drama of the first Five Year Plan in Russia as well as the Second World War and its aftermath. On top of all this, she pioneered the notion of aerial photographs to be enjoyed as near-abstractions.

Bourke-White was the daughter of an engineer and inventor who grew into a world where images of industry seemed as symbolic of human progress in the USA as they were in Soviet Russia. The Five Year Plans and the spirit that became the New Deal both fostered the romantic belief in salvation through steel.

By 1928 Bourke-White was a top industrial photographer and, although her images convey perhaps a rather too simple faith in the beauty of their subject matter, they are impressively well composed.

Before she produced her famous first cover for *Life* - a photograph of Fort Peck Dam - she had begun to extend her range. She collaborated with Erskine Caldwell (whom she later married) on a book about Southern poverty.

Bourke-White was appropriately an idealist who thought that photography could change the world. The Munich crisis found her in Czechoslovakia, and the pictures she gained there made her naively certain that a free Press, with its

photographs, might have stifled fascism. If there was to be a war she was determined to be there, "to make folks see just how horrible war is - and perhaps I shall have done my little bit towards ending wars for all time". She would be as good as her word, however ingenuous her hopes.

She became a public heroine, and even a national pin-up when photographed in a flying suit, but she aroused resentment in some male colleagues who thought her success was mostly due to her use of feminine charm.

Her most notable war pictures were of ruined Europe in the wake of the German retreat - the death camps and other harrowing scenes. After a spell in India there was soon another war, in Korea, where she took an unblinking shot of a severed head being appraised with cheerful satisfaction by the executioner.

Bourke-White then reverted to her early abstraction, but now in aerial views of landscape, many in colour. And though Parkinson's Disease soon put an end to her career, she allowed a photo feature to be made of her fight for recovery after brain surgeons had attempted unsuccessfully to cure her.

Margaret Bourke-White certainly deserves our admiration. Perhaps she hadn't quite the (rather malign) genius of Germany's Leni Riefenstahl, but she was a great photojournalist, if not a photographer of the very first rank. And more than 50 years ago, she showed how much a spirited woman could achieve in a man's world if she believed that new deals of all kinds were possible.