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Biographer and Profiler: Liking and Un-liking Dione Lucas

ABSTRACT

*Many writers regard biography as a literary genre and journalism as writing for media, yet biographers and journalists share many of the same traits. Both the journalist and the biographer begin by identifying with their subject and idealizing them, then revising and rejecting them (Lepore 2001: 134). As I attempted to shape my thoughts and write a biography of American celebrity chef Dione Lucas (1909-1971), a profile of her, published in *The New Yorker* in 1949, along with a file of its edits found in the *New Yorker Archive* in the *New York Public Library*, challenged my unwavering belief in her and ultimately led me to write differently about both her life and her times. This article explores how biography and journalism are both distinctive but closely related genres and explores their symbiotic relationship and, in the case of the Lucas biography, the impact of a magazine profile on biographical writing.*

KEYWORDS

Dione Lucas
profile
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Cordon Bleu

INTRODUCTION

Carolyn Steedman argues writing a biography is so difficult that it is much better ‘*not to write a biography* – especially if your non-subject is a clever woman, given to irony’ (Steedman 2009: 15; emphasis original). My subject is American celebrity chef Dione Lucas (1909-1971), clever, famous in her time and with a reputation as a storyteller prone to exaggeration (Howarth 1998, Schinto 2011), and I am struggling with her biography.

I like Dione Lucas too much. As her intending biographer, my initial fascination with her had already distorted my research. To make matters worse, we have a shared history (outlined briefly below). Neglecting my responsibility to Lucas, my audience and my craft, I brushed aside her detractors and set out blindly on a dangerous path. That was, until I

stumbled on a profile written by Angelica Gibbs and published in *The New Yorker* in 1949 (Gibbs 1949a: 34-36, 38, 40, 41-42, 45-46, 48, 50-53) – the home of the now popular profile genre (Ricketson 2004: 24 and Ricketson n.d.: 223). In a subsequent search of the catalogue of the New York City Library where the *New Yorker* archive is held, I found the ‘Run and Kill’ folder containing discussion between Gibbs and her editor, edits, inclusions and deletions, comments and fact checks.

Neither Gibbs nor her editor is kind to Lucas. This is not uncommon in journalistic writing. The journalist, according to Janet Malcolm, is like a professional burglar and must break in and rifle through their subject’s life (1989: 38). But Malcolm argues that the journalist and the biographer are similar in this respect. Both must gain the confidence of their subject, ‘preying on people’s vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse’ (Malcolm 1989: 38). ‘Biographers [are] notorious for falling in and out of love with the people they write about,’ writes Jill Lepore (2001:133). ‘Getting too close to your subject is a major danger, but not getting to know her well enough is just as likely’ (2001: 129).

Lucas left very little material of a private or personal nature about her life and much of the information that had filtered down was unreliable or questionable. Gibbs’ profile, even with its negative representation of Lucas, was exhaustively researched and eloquently written but, more importantly, the ‘Run and Kill’ folder was proof Gibbs’ profile of Lucas was carefully fact-checked and edited. This was, I felt, just what my research needed.

DIONE LUCAS

As a celebrity chef, cookbook author and television personality, Dione Lucas (1909-1971) had a significant impact on post-World War II American and Australian culinary history but by 2012, when I first came across her, this legacy had been distorted and largely forgotten. She had been seriously famous. She was the first woman to host her own high-rating cooking show on American television, *To the Queen’s Taste*, which aired on Thursday evenings at eight and had twice as many viewers as the *Gloria Swanston Show*, which was shown on a rival station at the same time (Gibbs 1949a: 35).

She toured Australia, sponsored by *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, in 1956, 1958 and 1960, demonstrating French Cordon Bleu cooking to adoring crowds in major department stores in all capital cities. On all three tours Lucas received enormous publicity with thousands of women crowding into city department stores to see her cooking

demonstrations (Lucas 1958: 1). Even the reports of her Australian tours show her difficult side. Denis O'Brien writes:

[*The Australian Women's Weekly*] was generating a host of other activities – books on cooking, knitting, and sewing; promotional tours by international experts in those fields. Although a winning exercise in public relations, the tours were not always easy for staff members who had to handle the sensitive temperaments of the experts. Tilly Shelton Smith: '[...] I particularly recall the first of two visits here by Dione Lucas, [...] and I was among the panel to interview her on Channel 9's *Meet the Press*. [...] At one stage I asked her, if she were destined to be on a desert island with only one kind of meal, what would she choose? I hoped she would give an interesting description of a meal but she replied: "Fruit". In desperation, I asked: "Cooked or raw?" and came back: "Raw."' (O'Brien 1982: 119)

RAIDING DIONE LUCAS' PRIVATE LIFE

Lucas left behind a public record of her life. Most people who had known her privately had either died or had very fragile memories of her. Little personal material existed.

Despite this, I felt close to Lucas. I had done the research, searched archives, interviewed, read cookbooks and tried recipes, and watched episodes of her 1950s television show *The Dione Lucas Show*. I had also had my own share of 'dumb luck', connecting with her son Mark Lucas. Through this connection I felt my relationship shift from researcher/biographer to family friend. But there was an even bigger connection between Dione Lucas and me. Our similar career paths gave me a strong bond to her and the way I understood her life. We both gave up promising careers to study in Paris at Cordon Bleu and we were both purposely vague about the length of time we studied there. We both ran restaurants and taught cookery.

In her archive at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University Boston MA, I had examined an early handwritten cookbook with splodges and crumbs and a small address book with doodles on many of its pages. When I watched episodes of her television show I saw her take many shortcuts. In one episode there was a small tear in the back of her dress, in another she used her cook's knife instead of a spatula to smooth the frosting on a cake and in another she had been unable to take the screw top off a jar of tarragon and had simply dismissed it as an unnecessary ingredient. I felt that I knew her.

I recorded a series of oral history interviews with Mark and he told me:

[...] what record we have of her professional and family life is remarkably scant (Lucas 2012: email 2 January).

I guess she kept her professional life and somewhat rare family conversations a bit separate. [...] As you will have gathered [...] she was not a mother you find every day! (Lucas 2011: email 31 December).

But in a small box Mark kept a collection of her published books, a photo album with photographs of her as a child, some published articles and a prayer she had written in pencil – a fragment of a private spiritual life that seemed at odds with her public life and career.

Much of the material I gathered contained inconsistencies and could not be verified. As a public figure, Lucas created her own life myths to protect her reputation and propel her career: myths that shifted and changed over time. Along with her stories were the stories created by the media – past and present – and by her remaining family members who struggled to remember her, simply because she was largely absent from their lives.

There were reports of her speaking angrily to students. She missed appointments and cancelled classes at the last minute. Dushka Howarth, her New York manager and publicist for a time, wrote in her memoir that Lucas did work incredibly hard all of the time, but she sometimes seemed a bit ‘dippy’ and covered up embarrassing situations with elaborate fabrications. She was also generous and well-meaning as well as very talented and most people forgave her. Howarth tells a story that took place in Lucas’ apartment in the Dakota Building where she operated cooking classes in the 1950s. Pupils arrived from Philadelphia but Lucas did not feel like teaching them. Howarth was asked to send them away and the ‘nice ladies meekly turned around and took the long trip home’ (Howarth 1998: 198). Robert Clark notes:

[m]ore than Beard, Jeanne Owen, or any of the food editors, Lucas was the most visible figure on the New York food scene of the early 1950s. A severe thin-lipped Englishwoman with hawklike features [...], by James[Beard’s] lights, Lucas was a strange bird [...] [S]he maintained an entourage of fanatical hangers-on that James described as a religious cult. (Clark 1996: 155)

Helen Brown (1904-1964), an internationally known food expert and prolific author, regarded her as a woman roundly disliked – or at least roundly envied – in the food community and one whose reputation rested on, what she believed, was her fraudulent appropriation of the Cordon Bleu name (155). I quietly shared Brown’s concerns about Lucas and Cordon Bleu in Paris, and wondered if it were a fiction. Records of her attendance at the prestigious culinary school did not exist and I could not verify how long her course had been if she had attended.

Until I read the 1949 profile by Angelica Gibbs and its edits, I defended her reputation whenever and wherever I could.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFILER

In 2011, Barbara Cain made the point in an interview that ‘you can’t understand a person without understanding the society around them’ (2011). And this is precisely what Gibbs offered in her profile. At the time of writing, Gibbs was a short story writer of some repute, best known for her frequently anthologized story ‘The Test’, published in *The New Yorker* on 5 June 1940. ‘The Test’ raises awareness of racial prejudice common in America at the time as a young coloured woman takes her driving test for the second time. Gibbs contributed many stories, profiles and articles to *The New Yorker* throughout the 1940s and 1950s. A feature of her writing style is that she uses the events and the characters in her stories to make a comment on life as she understood it.

In Gibbs’ profile Lucas is positioned at the epicentre of the rise of gastronomy in post-World War II New York along with the food snobbery that accompanied it. Many of the characters who followed Lucas are fictionalized and exaggerated to describe culinary pretensions in the city.

UN-LIKING LUCAS

Through the contents of the ‘Run and Kill’ folder, together with the final published article, I could see what had been deleted, discussed, queried, included and changed. I also had a window into what Gibbs and her editor thought about Lucas and her oeuvre. From the original commission, I expected a profile full of praise for Lucas, but this new material made it clear that Lucas had not impressed Gibbs or her editor. Moreover, they detested the pretentious post-War American ‘foodies’ who made up her ‘entourage of fanatical hangers-on’ (Clark 1996: 155).

From the title, ‘With Palette Knife and Skillet’, Gibbs starts her many attacks on Lucas. For those who were familiar with her cooking school or television show, ‘Palette Knife’ (a thin blade used for mixing artist’s colours) is a reference to her frequent declaration that that cooking was a fine art. In Australia she was quoted as saying, ‘cooking to my mind is as much an art as painting, dancing or composing poetry’ (Lucas 1958: 4). Gibbs’ editor comments on the first proof that ‘you couldn’t get in a line about how she feels cooking is classed as one of the arts by the Sorbonne. She is always quoting that. Feels it gives her authority and/or class’ (Gibbs 1949b). Another often quoted story was that when she graduated from Cordon Bleu, the famous Cordon Bleu teacher and chef Henri Pellaprat had given her a spatula: this was her palette knife. The skillet also had a story and Gibbs tells it,

later in the piece, in a fierce description of Lucas' lunchtime omelette-making performances. From the start, Gibbs delights in her clever lampooning of Lucas.

I had hoped, on finding the profile and the folder of proofs, that this material from 1949 would demystify the biographical information I had collected on Lucas' early career. The stories Lucas fed to the media had changed over time. Early in her career she frequently commented that she gave up her study of the cello to help with the family's income after her father became ill. Then, attending cooking school, albeit Cordon Bleu, was a sacrifice and definitely a compromise to a more artistic pursuit. As she became more successful though, this story changed and she repeatedly told the media that she had given up the cello because of her love of cooking: cooking was, after all, one of the fine arts. Gibbs confirms that there are questions around Lucas' version of her career path but she does not answer them. She does however start her piece with a scathing introduction to the rise of gastronomy in New York and a reviled very small group of *gastronomes* (seven hundred and fifty members) that was becoming a growing tribe in America. Clearly Gibbs was outraged about the pretensions around the French culinary tradition, especially at a time when French citizens could not access their own culinary traditions due to food shortages and limited availability of even basic items on the black market (34).

When Gibbs finally introduces Lucas, the description of her is an unflattering one:

[...] Her eyes, which are hazel, sparkle only on rare occasions, and her chin is sharply defined. She wears her straight, reddish-brown hair pulled ruthlessly back from her face and wound into an enormous bun on her neck. She shows [sic] a tendency to *embonpoint* [a polite way of saying she is plump and curvy]. She is only a little over five feet two inches tall and until recently weighed one hundred and forty. Now, however, she has taken off several pounds (35).

She is also critical of the décor of Lucas' restaurant and its operations:

Big red checkered cloths lurked under the smaller white ones covering the table tops, and on the grey walls were inscribed such gallicisms as "*bifstek*, 1¼ kilo 6f.30" as well as representations of fish, bread, meat and fruit. [...] The final telling *recherche* touch was provided by a small round piece of paper, slipped under each omelet dish, informing its recipient that this was the 1,536th omelet, say to be served in the Cordon Bleu Restaurant. (Gibbs 1949b).

The editor also adds, somewhat tellingly, to this description: 'She has redecorated her kitchen since I was there. God only knows what it looks like now' (Gibbs 1949b). To further sully Lucas' reputation and professionalism, Gibbs turns next to an attack on her book, *The Cordon Bleu Cookbook* (first published in 1947), pointing out the numerous mistakes of her

‘lackadaisical proofreader’ (Gibbs 1949: 38). Gibbs moves on to lampoon the people who attend Lucas’ cooking classes. ‘[...M]atrons from nearby Park Avenue, intent on boning up on some intricate dish with which to bedazzle their dinner guests and perhaps to fob off as a family specialty’ and ‘[...] men and women, [...] who have taken up cooking in a serious way and some of whom may even be candidates for a Cordon Bleu diploma’ (Gibbs 1949: 36).

At last I saw Lucas differently: her storytelling and boastfulness that I had so vehemently defended now bothered me. Gibbs’ insights moved me away from my less critical observations. I had been looking at Lucas through the lens of our shared experiences. I knew her voice from videos of her cooking show that I had watched, but now, with Gibbs’ sharply realized characterization of her in mind, I could hear her voice in the interview as she answered Gibbs’ questions. I imagined Gibbs scribbling notes in shorthand and thinking all the while what fun she would have with them when she sat at her typewriter to work on her story. At the same time, I was thinking, ‘What on earth will I do now, with mine?’

CONCLUSION

As Ann Oakley points out, ‘Above and beyond anything else, biographers are decision makers whose decisions matter, because the act of interpretation, of judging and evaluating, is ever present’ (2010: 428). She also says that biographers choose their subjects for all sorts of reasons but that they always must be their subject’s advocates. They must regard the life of their subject as one worth telling (2004: 430). The story of Dione Lucas is one that is worth telling. Initially I felt I had made an important discovery when I stumbled across her cookbook. Lucas taught Australian women French Cordon Bleu cooking in the 1950s: this was noteworthy. Then there was the desire to remember her and to remember her contribution to our food culture. Our shared history intrigued me and importantly, I was welcomed into her family. A biography fed by these criteria, without attempting to answer the questions and quash the criticism of her, offered little. It was Gibbs and the ‘Run and Kill’ folder that shifted my thinking from a story that was all praise - and outrage over her demise - to one that carefully analysed the little material that I had and one that sought to tell her life story in a way that recognized her failings, her vulnerability, her success and the sacrifices she made along the way.

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