

The Biographical Novel as Life Art

David Ebershoff, interviewed by Michael Lackey

Lackey: In the past, authors based novels on actual historical figures, but they changed the name in order to give themselves more creative license. Can you explain why you decided to name Einar Wegener/Lili Elbe after the actual historical figure, and can you explain the potential benefits and drawbacks of doing that?

Ebershoff: I knew right away I would call her Lili and use the name that she was given at birth, Einar Wegener. And it was a very practical reason. When I first came across the story in the 1990s, she was not well known, and history had partially lost her. She was not as known as she deserved to be as a transgender pioneer and as someone significant in LGBT history. In fact, when I first came across her name, it was in an academic book on gender studies and identity in literature, and it said that she was the first person to have what was then called a sex change but what we now call gender reassignment or gender confirmation surgery. And my reaction to this was: "Wait a minute, I thought Christine Jorgenson was the first." Jorgenson was an American who transitioned in the early 1950s, and I think in popular culture, many people believe she was the first person to have gender confirmation surgery. Why that was the case I do not know, nor do I know if she ever said that, but many, many people believe that she was the first. And so when I came across Lili's name, I was struck that she was somebody who transitioned roughly two decades before Christine Jorgenson and yet didn't have her proper recognition as a pioneer. And so I knew that to write about her, even though I was writing fiction and I would be using the tools of fiction to write about her, I was going to call her by the name she chose for herself—Lili Elbe—and follow the outline of her life and especially her transition. One of the efforts of *The Danish Girl* is to pull her story and her life out of the obscurity that it was in at the time. I don't want to suggest that she was completely unknown; certainly some academics knew of her, some activists. But she did not have, in my opinion, her proper place in LGBT history, and so to not use her name

would be a kind of erasure that I didn't want, that didn't have any sort of role in what I was doing. So I always thought of her as Lili.

Lackey: Are there any potential drawbacks of using the actual name?

Ebershoff: Yes, people might assume that *The Danish Girl* is a biography. This is about Lili Elbe, a very significant person in LGBT history, a transgender pioneer. So why is this not a biography? Why is this a novel? Why are some details different than what I might read online? These questions are legitimate; I certainly don't want to dismiss them. But they are some of the potential drawbacks of using her name.

Lackey: You make an important distinction between biography and biofiction. Biographers seek to tell the story of an actual person with as much precision and accuracy as possible, but fiction writers deal with symbols and metaphors in order to make their characters more universal, which explains why they alter facts about their biographical subject. Can you talk about some of the strategies you used in order to convert Einar/Lili into a symbol that has universal significance?

Ebershoff: I agree with you that in fiction, often, the characters can become symbolic and represent something larger than what they are in the book. But I also believe that as a writer, I cannot think of a character as a symbol, because then the character becomes flat, and I could lose the contradictions that any interesting character has. So I never thought of Lili as a symbol while I was writing the book. I certainly understand her as one now. When writing, I asked myself: What are the responsibilities of writing about such an important figure in transgender history? And what responsibilities do I have to transgender readers, to the transgender community, and how do I represent a larger experience than her own? Some people might look to the character as a representation of "the transgender experience." This is a big burden for any writer to feel, and in fact it's an impossible burden because no human can represent fully a community of people who have very diverse individual experiences. And it was only by backing away from that responsibility of representing a community as a whole or an experience of many people and acknowledging that my job was to represent Lili's experience and represent this particular character that I could actually write freely. By focusing on the details of her life and her inner life, perhaps she could become universal. To get back to your question. Only by making her very individual does she perhaps become universal. So I've had over the years many responses from transgender men and women and spouses of transgender men and women,

and they have written me different things about their response to the book and to Lili's story. But one thing that often comes up in these letters is they will tell me something that Lili did or felt that was similar to their own experiences in one way or another. And so it seems like there were portions of her life that do represent some part of some transgender people's experience.

Lackey: It seems that your novel challenges readers to think about transgender experience in a broader and more comprehensive way. For instance, when I teach *The Danish Girl*, I spend a lot of time talking about Greta. The original Gerda was Danish, but you made your Greta an American who is uncomfortable with her identity as a wealthy American. In short, your Greta, like Einar, inherited an identity with which she is not comfortable. Your novel explores the idea that many are born into identities that they are not comfortable with, so even if we are not transgender, we can still identify with the transgender community because many of us have gone through this experience of being born into an identity with which we are not comfortable. And what you are looking at in this novel is this whole process of constructing an identity, whether it is a new national or gender identity. Would you agree with that interpretation of your novel?

Ebershoff: I absolutely agree with that. Questions of identity: Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who do I want others to see? Who among us hasn't asked those questions? And who among us hasn't looked in the mirror, at least once, and questioned the reflection in one way or another? It could be a literal reflection or a metaphorical reflection. And part of growing up and part of becoming ourselves is to stare down those questions of identity and answer them honestly and truthfully. For some people, that is not a particularly difficult exercise. They are comfortable in their identity; it is natural to them. And for many others, it is a much more difficult struggle, and it's one that many people continue to struggle with their entire lives. And I know that for LGBT people, this is a huge part of coming into themselves, whether it's coming out or, for a transgender person, transitioning. It is answering those questions: who am I? And who do I want to be? And who do I want the world to see? And how do I reconcile the differences between who the world sees and who I know I am? When there's a discrepancy between who you know who you are and who the world sees, many people sit uncomfortably in their lives, and they're constantly in struggle. That struggle can ebb and flow, but it is a continuous inner struggle, and it can really take up a great deal of one's life and inner life. And it's hard; you can't become yourself until you resolve that struggle to a certain degree. And so you are right that the character Greta, she's rejecting her identity. She's an heiress. She's from a world that

expects her to be a certain kind of young woman, marry a certain kind of man. And she's rejecting that as a woman, as an artist, as a wife. So part of her story is becoming her own individual woman and coming up with her own definition of what it means to be a woman of her day. And one of the things that I was always fascinated by is how Lili, as she progresses in her transition, becomes increasingly stereotypical, her understanding of what it means to be a woman, her understanding of femininity. She's drawn to things that stereotypically have been the female realm.

Lackey: She has internalized simple binaries about masculinity and femininity.

Ebershoff: Yes, that's a very good way of saying it. There's not a lot of complexity to her understanding of what a woman can do. And I always found this really remarkable because she lived with such an unconventional woman and a woman who really defined herself, defined what a woman can or can't or will or won't do. And that Lili didn't look to her spouse for a source of inspiration for her own identity really interested me. There are multiple reasons for that, and often when I write fiction, I try to lay out the questions and lay out the story and allow the reader to answer those questions. I don't want to fully answer them. What in part accounts for Lili's simplistic understanding of the masculine and the feminine, and her failure to look to Greta for an example of female complexity, is because what she was doing was so new, and she had no real role models to look to, very few examples of what her life could be. She was really creating her own path. And so, in some ways, she had to rely on some familiar tropes while she created that path.

Lackey: This raises an important question about the value of biofiction. Do you see *The Danish Girl* primarily as creating empathy or inciting action? Let me be more specific. When I teach the novel, my students have more empathy for Einar/Lili, but many come to that experience through Greta. After I show students how Greta transitions from being an American woman to a Danish woman, students realize that identity transformation happens in multiple ways. Therefore, my non-transgender students feel more connection with and compassion for Lili. But if we focus on Lili's transgender experience as a metaphor, then it provides students with a framework for taking that bold step of transitioning from one identity to another. Many people are afraid to take that courageous step into the unknown. Would you say that your novel provides us with a framework for understanding agency, that power to take control of one's own life? Did you see that at all as you were writing the novel? That your novel could impact people, more than just the transgender community? In essence, the transgender community could become a symbol

that inspires and empowers people who are not transgender. Do you know what I'm saying?

Ebershoff: I do. One of the wonderful aspects of the last several years as transgender issues have become better understood and more transgender men and women have told their stories is the idea that the world is not binary and that there is a fluidity to many people's gender and to their gender identity, and that it's wrong to assume that the world breaks down in a simple black and white, male and female way. Many cis people see themselves as male and many cis people see themselves as female. But there is a legitimate space in between; not every cis gender man is the same as every other cis gender man and not every cis gender woman is the same as every other cis gender woman. Many people feel like they possess both the masculine and feminine in them, and that is absolutely natural in human history and we have many examples of it. I think that in the last decade or so, as more transgender stories have been told by artists and by individuals, we have a much better understanding of how that applies to all of us. So there's that aspect of what Lili's story means, and I think that goes beyond the book itself.

Lackey: This fluid approach to gender explains one of Lili's mistakes. Near the end of the novel, she wants to get rid of her paintings, because she wants to distance herself from all things Einar and all things male. But Greta responds differently. At first, she wants to cast off all things Waud, which is her wealthy family, and all things American. But by the end of the novel, she accepts both her family and her Americanness, even though she has transitioned to being Danish. By stark contrast, Einar wants to get rid of the paintings. This is one of the mistakes that Einar makes after transitioning to Lili. Was this contrast strategically done on your part?

Ebershoff: Yes, I was always drawn to this particular detail of Lili's story, that when she expressed herself as Lili, even very early in her transitioning, that she rejected painting. And she said specifically that painting belonged to Einar, that the paintings were done by Einar. This is part of the historical record.

Lackey: And women didn't even paint. She, the real Lili as well as your character, says that in the journals.

Ebershoff: That's right, she saw them as the work of someone else. This is a very strong demarcation between her life before she transitioned and her life after transitioning. This is probably not so representative of the experiences of transgender men and women today, but Lili didn't have examples of how

to do what she was doing. So I can understand how psychologically she needed to establish very distinct markers for her to make sense of what she was creating of her life. For her to truly believe in herself, to proceed with her transition, she had to break from her past. And so part of her biographical story is that she did not paint and she wasn't interested in painting. And yet there are so many ironies here because it was through painting, not her own but Gerda's, that she could begin to express herself. We have the paintings Gerda did of Lili, and these are representations of an ideal version of Lili and what she wanted to be and how she wanted to be seen. And, so, for Lili to reject painting, even though painting had helped her realize herself in many ways, intrigued me on so many levels.



Figure 1 Gerda Wegener, "Lili, Hot Summer," 1924. <https://curiator.com/art/gerda-wegener/lili-hot-summer>

Lackey: Can you talk briefly about the way a fictional character, and I'm taking Greta as a fictional character, functions to illuminate the biographical subject that you've chosen? Greta is clearly much more fictional than Lili. And can you talk more generally about the role of the fictional character in relationship to the biographical subject and the biographical novel?

Ebershoff: In *The Danish Girl*, I had a very strategic vision of how to tell the story because I was fictionalizing it. Let me focus on the paintings, because this will enable me to answer your questions. Lili rejected painting and insisted that she wasn't an artist and that she didn't know how to paint. All those skills and impulses belong to Einar, not her, she said. However, I disagree because I believe that she was a great artist, even after she transitioned, and her greatest creation was herself. Artists are visionaries; they see something that does not yet exist. They can bring into creation something that is not yet there. And in many ways this is what Lili is doing: she is envisioning her future self, she is seeing a version of herself that is not yet there, and she is creating it. And this is perhaps greater and more significant than any painting she could have done or did do when she lived as Einar. And so she never saw herself as this great artist, but I do. And so this helped me understand how to write the novel. When I began to think about Lili Elbe and writing a novel about her, I began to think of the story through two important lenses. The first is that she was a transgender pioneer. This cannot be underestimated and I am not underestimating it when I say what I'm about to say. But when I first encountered her, her name was sort of all she was—a sort of footnote in LGBT history. The complexity and contradictions of her life were not present in what I viewed and saw and read about her. But it was through Greta's paintings of Lili that I began to see the depths and layers of her character.

Lackey: Can you give me an example to illustrate?

Ebershoff: Here is a painting of Lili: it's Lili naked, sitting in a beautiful red chair with her back to us holding a fan (see Figure 1). This is an intricate painting. I imagine it must have taken weeks, if not months, to paint this. Think about how long Lili had to sit there, exposed, naked to her spouse. Lili was tacitly saying, "This is how I want you to see me, this is how I want to be seen, this is who I *really* am." Now think about the painter, the real life Gerda or Greta in my book, looking at her spouse this way, carefully, intimately. Imagine the trust and respect of this marriage, for the two of them to create a painting like this. This painting and others like it showed me something about their marriage that I didn't know when I first started reading about

Lili. It showed me that they had a kind of faith in each other that is rare and extraordinary, that they could be with each other as their true selves. It's very hard in life to ever find somebody that you can truly expose yourself to. And then Greta felt so much love and understanding that she could create Lili through her art. This finally gets to your question. I saw this first as a story of Lili Elbe, the transgender pioneer, but there's much more to it, as there's much more to any of us. Nobody's life can be reduced to one sentence. So it's also a story of love and marriage and trust, and it's a story of art. This explains how I decided to write *The Danish Girl*. I would use the lenses of marriage and love, and the lenses of art and creation. That gets me to Greta and why she is much more fictionalized than Lili. I wanted the novel to take the reader into those emotional spaces that led to the creation of that painting. In the book, Einar and Greta thought of their marriage as a cove, a place that's protected just for the two of them, or a dark cave where their intimacy could live and breathe and feel safe. I wanted to take the reader to those spaces that can exist in marriages and may exist in marriages, or relationships. I wanted the reader to know that place that was so intimate between the two of them, but that doesn't wholly exist in the historical record. They were often together, so they weren't writing letters to each other. They were not like John and Abigail Adams, who were separated and wrote these incredible letters that tell us through language the nature of their relationship. That doesn't exist with these two. But the paintings express what was there. I could sense the space that existed between them, this intimate space of marriage. But what was in it, the specificity of what was in it wasn't there, and that's a big part of what I was inventing. So I said to myself: I'm going to call Lili Lili for the reasons I said earlier, but I'm going to do more invention with the wife as a signal both to me as I write the book and to the reader that this is where fiction is coming in even more so. And to change the name from Gerda to Greta was part of that thinking. I do believe that if you were to read *The Danish Girl*, although there are many biographical details about the character Greta that are different from the historical person Gerda, I do believe that you will have an accurate sense of the emotional journey she went on with her spouse as Lili became Lili Elbe.

Lackey: Earlier you said, "Artists are visionaries who bring into existence something that is not yet there." There are two separate ways of thinking about artists as visionaries. Let me give you two examples. William Styron published *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967, and he altered many facts about the actual historical Turner. In his novel, Turner has a homosexual experience, which infuriated many people, because there is no evidence that this ever happened. Styron knew this was not true, but he included it

anyway. Why? He said that his novel is not biography and it is not history. What readers get is a “metaphorical diagram,” which readers could use to illuminate events that occurred in both the past and the present. So he included the gay scene in order to illustrate how the structures and conditions of oppression that were used against blacks in 1831 are the same structures and conditions of oppression that are used against gays and lesbians in 1967. As an artist, what Styron gives is a new way of thinking about oppression from two separate time periods. Oscar Wilde goes one step further. As an artist, he wanted to create new ways of thinking and being, specifically about homosexuality. Talk about your vision as an artist. Are you, like Styron, giving us a metaphorical diagram for understanding? Or, are you, like Wilde, trying to create something new through your work?

Ebershoff: I'd probably agree with both in some ways. With *The Danish Girl*, I knew that I had to understand her story and then understand it in my way. Lili's life resonated with me, as a gay man, in many profound ways. This idea of struggling to know who you are, ignoring who you really are, coming to terms with it in isolation, and eventually telling more people, and then just accepting yourself and either having the world accept that or reject that—that all resonated with me, significantly. Her courage resonated with me, significantly. But at the same time, every writer will see a story or a life or a place through his or her eyes, based on their own experiences, their worldview. And for me, I needed to understand that. I don't at all think of her as my subject. I never would think of her that way, and I don't think of *The Danish Girl* as the first and last book about her. This is my way of thinking about her life, and I think that's what Oscar Wilde was saying. An artist creates something that can only be created by that individual artist. And anyone else would do it differently just by the nature of the individuality of the artist and their impulses. At the same time, I don't think I can ignore what Styron is saying in that her life does represent something bigger than her life. She was a pioneer and she showed the world a life that few thought was possible. But there is a danger of reducing her to a one sentence description, that she was a transgender pioneer, the first to have gender reassignment surgery. That's such a simple quotation about her life and it eliminates the role of the people around her. And I knew that others were a very significant part of her story. If her spouse had not been a part of her life, her transition would have been fundamentally different. I'm not saying she would not have transitioned, but it would have been a different transition. And I think this is one of the things I wanted to show, how there is a very intimate experience of recognizing who you are and becoming yourself, and that we do this with others. So *The Danish Girl* is a metaphor. I think both Styron and Wilde are right, and I can't

be too rigid about it in my thinking. But I do definitely lean toward Wilde in that writers show us the story through their point of view.

Lackey: Russell Banks has given us a useful way of thinking about different genres. In an interview, he says that writers establish different truth contracts with readers. So if a person authors a biography, the reader expects fidelity to the facts. *Cloudsplitter* is Banks's biographical novel about Owen Brown, the son of John Brown. The actual Owen dies in the nineteenth century, but Banks had him live into the twentieth century. I asked him why he did that, and he said: In the novel, I'm examining the terrorist mindset, and I wanted to show how this way of thinking persists into the present. He went on to say: "Of course, if I was writing a biography, I couldn't do that." But he says, "I expect my readers to understand that I have a different truth contract with readers than a biographer." Can you talk about this whole notion of truth contracts?

Ebershoff: I agree with what he's saying. I think that every book teaches a reader how to read it. It will give clues to the reader of what it is, what it's trying to be, and what it isn't, and what it's not trying to be. There are signals. This is going to be *this* kind of book, and you can expect this format from this book. And if the book defies it, it defies it purposely. And so part of that is the truth contract that Banks talks about. In *The Danish Girl*, Lili Elbe is called Lili Elbe, while the character Gerda is called Greta. Those signals are my truth contract, where that story is going to move a little bit further away from the known or unknown facts of this historical person. And part of the truth contract is point of view. The novel switches; it's third person, but it switches from Einar's point of view, then Greta's point of view, then Einar and Lili's point of view, and Greta's point of view. Each chapter goes back and forth, and it's very much part of the signal I give my readers. You're going to see the story from the close point of view of two individuals; no others; and no sort of larger omniscient third person point of view. So with any limited point of view, there's a signal to the reader that this is how these characters perceive these experiences, and that's part of the truth contract.

Lackey: This is precisely why Banks's idea of the truth contract is so important. So many criticized Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* because he took liberties with historical fact and the biographical record. But Styron retorted: I'm not giving you history or biography. I have written a novel, which gives you a metaphor for thinking about history and biography. People criticized the novel because they expected it to do something that Styron had no intention of doing. Does this describe what you did in *The Danish Girl*?

Ebershoff: His answer resonates with me, but it's not the answer I would give if the question is posed about *The Danish Girl*. I felt that the tools of fiction, and especially fiction's ability to mine a character's inner life, could show a reader who Lili was, what she thought and felt, and what her life means. I wanted to bore down to her core because her story is very much about her looking deep within herself to discover herself. Fiction allowed me to do this. Although I was writing fiction I was always aiming for an emotional truth.

Lackey: I have noticed a tension in the writings of biographical novelists. The biographical novel first became popular in the 1930s: Robert Graves, Irving Stone, Arna Bontemps, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, and Zora Neale Hurston published biographical novels in that decade. At that same time, writers were casting a skeptical eye on truth, so most biographical novelists are not moralists. And yet, you all seem to have a deep commitment to social justice. So I wonder if you could talk about the novel as educating readers. Here I do not mean education in a conventional sense, like I'm giving you a universal truth. Rather, education in the sense that you are giving readers ways of seeing that are vastly different from what we get in the moralist novels of nineteenth century.

Ebershoff: A novel can have a profound effect in showing people new ideas, new lives, inspiring them in their own lives. And many of us want that out of a book. But I don't think I can go into writing a book with those goals because I'll be aiming toward them as opposed to aiming toward the truth of my characters. Those goals may be achieved through the truth of my characters. If I'm writing a book to try to inspire people, to try to educate people about LGBT lives and issues, or other issues, I may miss the mark in creating complex, compelling, even contradictory characters. By focusing on my characters, and finding the language to represent their experiences honestly, perhaps the book will have something to say about social justice and inspire people in their own lives. I never start with theme. I start with characters, story, narrative, and language. So social justice is in some ways an after effect of a book, albeit a significant one.

Lackey: Margaret Atwood said something similar. When discussing Grace Marks, the protagonist in her novel *Alias Grace*, she started with a resonant symbol, which was based on Grace's life. But as she began to flesh out that character, the themes started to emerge. She didn't begin with a bulky idea or agenda. Rather, she thought about a character and its symbolic possibilities, and then something powerful emanated from that.

Ebershoff: I have to say I didn't fully understand *The Danish Girl* until I'd written it. I don't want to imply I am just wholly ignorant of subject and the characters because that sounds idiotic. But all the themes and all the symbols in it I didn't have a full command of until it was on the page. And even then, there's plenty that readers point out to me. That's the mystery of fiction writing. And if the mystery is not there, if it doesn't surprise me, it won't surprise the reader. So one of the challenges of the work is to maintain the mystery and the wonder as I write while not being totally lost and just going any which way.

Lackey: Can you talk about that mystery in relation to the character's evolution? It seems that biographical novelists focus on a character who is blind at some point, but through an unexpected transformation, starts to see things in a new and startling way.

Ebershoff: When I look back at what I've written, I see a pattern, and maybe I've seen it because other people pointed it out to me. But I tend to write about people, and Lili Elbe is the first example of this in my work, who have a journey/evolution ahead of them. The first phase of that is always internal. Understanding themselves and having to break out of a society and step out of a comfortable world into the unknown to realize themselves. This is a pattern that I've done in other books as well. And that to me is evolution and transformation. And that kind of story is something I'm always drawn to. We're following an individual through and creating his or her own history. It's sort of personal history. That is what the biographical novel is. It's the creation of one's own history.