

## BEST OF

Books &amp; Arts in Review

Spring Reading Is Here

The Best Books of March

Best in Children's Books

The 10 Best I

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/books/after-lives-review-the-biographers-art-c3a21579>

ARTS &amp; CULTURE | BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

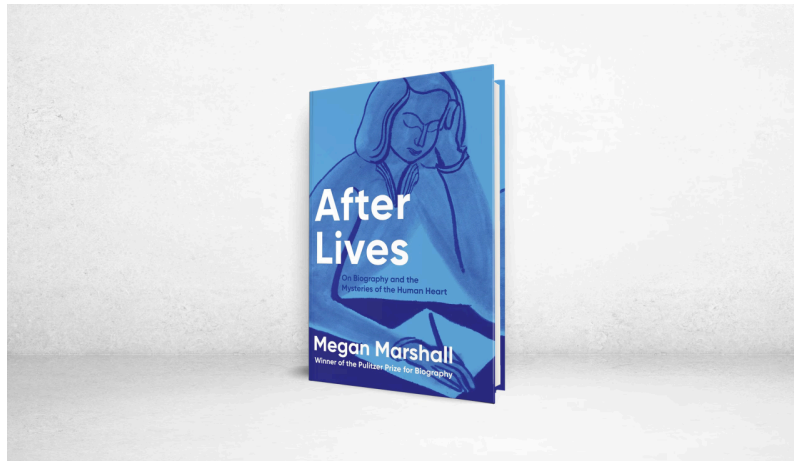
Follow

# 'After Lives' Review: The Biographer's Art

Essays by a writer of literary lives meditate on the obsessions and obstacles endemic to her trade.

By Christoph Irmscher

April 15, 2025 11:34 am ET



"We are all biographers from childhood," writes Megan Marshall in "After Lives," a short, incisive meditation on her career. We spend our lives, she claims, figuring out other people, hoping to learn from them "how to live, how not to live, what it means to live." But surely there is a difference between trying to make sense of the man sitting across from us on the bus and deciding to write an entire book about people who lived long ago—and then devoting, perhaps, decades to that effort, as Ms. Marshall did with her first work of biography, "The Peabody Sisters" (2005).

---

GRAB A COPY

---

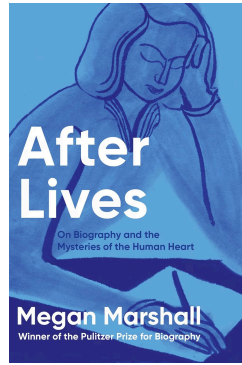
Biographers are a special breed. The best of them are historians, archivists, psychologists, novelists and detectives all rolled into one. And they must have

## After Lives: On Biography and the Mysteries of the Human Heart

By Megan Marshall

Mariner Books

208 pages



saintlike patience. Die-hard biographers have been known to sit, in Ms. Marshall's words, "for days and months, then years, in library archives deciphering the handwritten letters and diaries" of their subjects. Sometimes they might, as Henry James imagined, cross the boundaries of decency: "Ah, you publishing scoundrel," Juliana Bordereau chides the narrator of James's short novel

"The Aspern Papers" (1888). Hoping to score the poet Jeffrey Aspern's love letters, the ambitious biographer had tried to break into her desk.

In "After Lives," Ms. Marshall succinctly defines biography as "the art we make of lives." And art she has certainly made of it in her work. "The Peabody Sisters" is an intricately woven group portrait of Elizabeth, Mary and Sophia Peabody, three siblings who, in various ways, put themselves at the heart of the movement that became known as American Transcendentalism. Throughout, Ms. Marshall stages scenes simmering with subtle erotic energy—the moment, for example, when Sophia, wandering into her parlor, sinks into a couch and, simply by being there, claims for herself the man who was visiting that day and whom her sister Elizabeth had wanted to marry: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "handsomer than Lord Byron."

Reconstructing the lives of writers long dead—her 2013 biography of the writer Margaret Fuller revived yet another Transcendentalist—Ms. Marshall had kept herself largely hidden from view. That changed with "Elizabeth Bishop" (2017), where she let her own experience onto the page, recalling her time as a student in Bishop's poetry class at Harvard. "After Lives" continues this blend of autobiography and biography. The book's first and most effective chapter begins with a flourish: the story of the casket that contained the remains of Sophia Hawthorne, Nathaniel's wife, along with those of their adult daughter, Una. In 2006 it was shipped back from England, where the pair had been buried together, to be added to Nathaniel's grave in Concord, Mass.

Ms. Marshall was present when the box was opened, revealing a handful of bones, a knit stocking and lots of hair, Sophia's salt-and-pepper gray nestled next to Una's auburn strands. The unexpected sight made Ms. Marshall question contemporary reports that, close to the end of her difficult life, Una's hair had turned white or gray.

(She was only 33 when she died.) Una Hawthorne was a real person, Ms. Marshall told herself, so much more than the troublemaker others have sought to turn her into. There are limits to the biographer's art.

Ms. Marshall is at her best when a piece of material evidence—a letter, a photograph, a forgotten artifact—piques her interest, such as her father's old ice pick, its sharp end stuck in a piece of cork, a symbol of the “concealed danger” she associates with him. Elsewhere, she contemplates her mother's self-portrait: Holding a piece of charcoal over a blank sheet of paper, Elva Spiess Marshall has depicted herself as right-handed, perhaps to normalize herself. The daughter not only restores her mother to proud left-handedness but also fills her empty sheet with details: the male bias in art school that stalled Elva's career, the damage done to her by an unreliable husband.

Sometimes the distance between biographer and subject cannot so easily be bridged. Writing about her high-school classmate Jonathan Jackson, Ms. Marshall captures the explosive climate of Pasadena, Calif., in the 1960s. Jonathan, one of the few African-American students at her school, hung out with his white classmates but remained aloof, bitter about the racism he endured. His anger finally erupted in extreme violence: In August 1970, in an attempt to free his imprisoned brother George, Jonathan took an entire county courtroom hostage. Four people, including Jonathan, died. What sticks in Ms. Marshall's mind is the memory of the young man hamming it up in English class a few weeks earlier as Nick Bottom from “A Midsummer Night's Dream,” play-acting his own death and repeating Nick's line, “die, die, die, die, die.”

Perhaps the most poignant chapter of “After Lives” is set in Kyoto, where Ms. Marshall spent a few months as a visiting professor and found herself on the trail of Japan's version of Henry David Thoreau, the poet Kamo no Chōmei, who, more than 600 years before his New England counterpart, moved into a cabin in the woods. Her partner's decline from congestive heart failure leads Ms. Marshall to ponder, with fresh urgency, the question once posed by Chōmei—how to survive in “this husk of a world.” As it turns out, for the veteran biographer there's only one possible answer: to keep looking at how other people have done it.

Conceived as a look back, “After Lives” ends with a preview. A painting in New York's Museum of Modern Art, “Skylight” (1948), by Elizabeth Bishop's friend Loren MacIver (1909-98), catches Ms. Marshall's eye—two rows of six bluish rectangles, with two of the panels shown partially open to let in the light. The design suggests to the writer a source in real life and sends her to MacIver's former townhouse in

Greenwich Village. While she can't make out a skylight from the street, a check on Google Earth confirms it's really there. Megan Marshall's next biography may have begun.

—*Mr. Irmscher is the author of "Max Eastman: A Life" and other books.*

*Appeared in the April 16, 2025, print edition as 'The Biographer's Patient Art'.*

---

## Further Reading

**WTO Sees Fall in Trade Flows, Warns Against Spreading Conflict**

**Treasury Yields Change Little as U.S. Retail Sales Beat Forecast**

**Another College Football Tradition is Going Extinct: the Spring Game**

**Early Targets of Harvard Funding Cuts: Tuberculosis, ALS Research**

**Xi Fights Trump's Tariffs With Global Charm Offensive**

---

## Videos

