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Documenting a Life Seminar

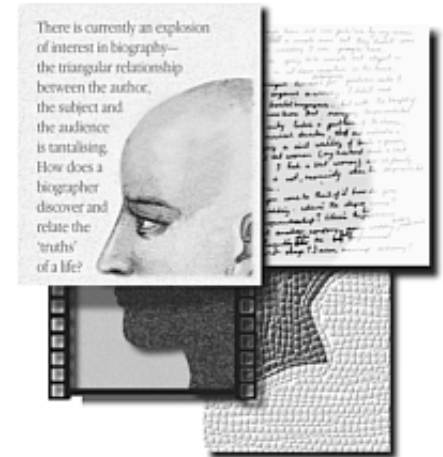
Saturday 26 October 1996

National Library of Australia, Parkes Place, Canberra

Papers for the Documenting a Life seminar appear at the National Library of Australia's Online Seminars.

This seminar was held in conjunction with the 1996 National Book Council's Gold Medal Award luncheon held at the National Library of Australia. The luncheon was also the occasion for the launch of the NBC's inaugural National Award for Biography, which was presented to Abraham Biderman for his autobiography *The World of My Past*. Biderman's powerful address, although not formally part of the seminar program, contributed a highly personal and evocative perspective on the 'stuff' of autobiography.

There is currently an explosion of interest in biography - the triangular relationship between the author, the subject and the audience is tantalising. The underlying question of this seminar was how does a biographer discover and relate the 'truths' of a life? The program included major Australian biographers and explored approaches to the documentary 'evidence' of a life, to biography as narrative and to the balancing act that is the lot of the biographer. The National Library of Australia is custodian of many forms of the documentary 'evidence' used by biographers and other researchers. In this particular seminar many of the speakers made some or extensive reference to the use they had made of the National Library or service it had received from the Library. Brian Kiernan, Associate Professor of English at the University of Sydney, spoke extensively about the potential for valuable synergistic relationships between users of primary materials (such as personal papers, manuscripts and pictorial material) and the National Library. His work on the papers of playwright David Williamson has contributed to the organisation of those papers for the Library. (The second edition of his book *David Williamson: A Writer's Career* (1996) can be ordered from the [Library Shop](#).)



Acclaimed portrait painter Judy Cassab spoke at length about preparing her diaries for deposit with the National Library of Australia, and conveyed a strong sense of gratitude that they are in safe keeping. A major theme of her talk was the discordance between publishing for public consumption her private writings that had resided in a carefully locked cupboard for so long. Cassab, twice winner of the Archibald Prize for portraiture, has now been acclaimed in the literary world, her *Diaries* having won the Nita B. Kibble Award for women writers. (*Diaries* is available from the [Library Shop](#).)

Chris Cunneen alluded to the richness of other National Library collections such as microfilmed electoral rolls and oral histories for researchers of biography and spoke at length about the amount of research it might take to glean even a few essential facts, and how well supported this research is by Library staff. Cunneen is the Deputy General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (available from the [Library Shop](#)), for which he has written some 60 articles. He is currently completing a biography of Sir William McKell.

Brenda Niall is a Melbourne writer whose books include two multiple award-winning biographies - *Martin Boyd: A Life* and *Georgiana: A Biography of Georgiana McCrae, Painter, Diarist, Pioneer*, available through the [Library Shop](#). Until recently Reader in English at Monash University, Niall now writes full time. Among her current projects is an anthology of Australian letters for Oxford University Press which she is co-editing with John Thompson of the National Library.

Veronica Brady was a 1996 [Harold White Fellow](#) at the National Library of Australia, and has recently retired as Associate Professor of English at the University of Western Australia, where she is now a Senior Research Fellow. Brady has published widely on Australian literature and culture, her most recent books including *Caught in the Draught* and *Shall These Bones Live?*. She is currently working on a biography of poet Judith Wright, which was the main topic of her seminar presentation. Her inspiration for this work comes partly from the strong values held by her subject.

Describing himself as a 'sometime' film maker, Dennis O'Rourke discussed issues of representation, of subjectivity and objectivity, and the relationship between author, subject and audience in the creation of 'documentary' materials. His highly personal and frank presentation followed the showing of an extract from his controversial film *Good Woman of Bangkok*. The audience appreciated that the issues so apparent in his film documentary work also applied to written works. This presentation was a confronting illustration of the aforementioned triangular relationship between the author, the subject and the audience. Despite his reticence O'Rourke has received many prizes and awards for his nine films.

Speakers:

- [Brian Kiernan](#) / Documenting a Life: Contemporary Interest in Biography
- [Judy Cassab](#) / *Diaries*
- [Chris Cunneen](#) / The Australian Dictionary of Biography - Creating History

- [Brenda Niall](#) / The Trunk in the Attic: The Biographer and the Bundle of Letters
 - [Dennis O'Rourke](#) / Documentary Fictions: Biography, Truth and Moral Lies
 - [Veronica Brady](#) / Judith Wright's Biography: A Delicate Balance Between Trespass and Honour
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