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Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me*: A Curious Work of Criminal Biography

Sunanda Jena

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Abstract:

Biographies, despite being one of the most popular forms of life-writing, are also the most unreliable works on a person's life. A combination of factors like the third person narration, credibility and character of the author, the nature of the relationship between the author and the subject, and the style of writing and narration itself put the biographical works under suspicion, raising questions regarding the very authenticity and validity of the events narrated by the author from someone else's life. The following paper, with the help of Ann Rule's biography of Theodore Robert Bundy (Ted Bundy), America's infamous serial rapist/murderer, titled "The Stranger Beside Me," will try to explore the ambivalent position of the biographer/author of this work and the unreliable nature of the narrative.

Keywords: Biography, Ambivalent, Credibility, Skeptical.

Biography is recognized as one of the most important genres of 'life-writing,' it is a form of narrative writing in which the author provides a detailed description of another person's life, which includes not only the significant facts and events in that person's life but also his/her views, feelings, and attitude towards specific experiences in his/her life. Biographies are largely non-fictional since they are true stories about real people, but they can be fictional as well. Apart from written texts, works in diverse media, for example, films and television shows that portray the life of a real person are also different forms of biographies. Over time, many sub-genres of biography have emerged keeping in mind the narrative style, area of focus, and content of the biography—for instance, the sub-genre of 'intellectual biography' focuses on the 'history' of an individual's mind to examine the nature of thoughts, ideas and views that the subject had. The authors of biographies are usually people—with some experience in writing—who have had some close connection or association with the subject of the biographies and therefore consider themselves to be in a suitable position to narrate the life story of that subject, the subject of biographies on the other hand range from politicians, celebrities, philosophers to terrorists, criminals, and eccentric individuals.

Given the typical nature and process of biographical writing where a second person with a completely different set of qualities and views writes 'about' another individual whose life he has observed only from a distance, it is natural to have some doubts regarding the credibility of the work. The author of a biography who is close to the subject of his work is simultaneously in a position where he, being a 'distant observer' can provide an objective account of the person's life as well as is someone who is directly in contact—unlike the readers who may or may not know the subject—with the individual whose biography he is writing and is therefore personally acquainted (not always) with not just that individual's life but his/her 'daily' life. Thus, a biographer is at a high risk of narrating the life incidents of someone else in the 'way that he saw and interpreted' it instead of providing a faithful account of the person's life. Although biographers strictly adhere to the subject's narration of the events and stick to the opinions, feelings, and emotions that they experienced, given the position of the biographer who has closely tracked the subject's life events and who has the ultimate authority to put down the subject's life into 'words' it is sometimes difficult for the biographer to 'not' include his own personal comments and views on some of the subject's experience or portray them as 'he felt' it—when the subject might not be feeling the same thing at all—causing the readers to wonder whether the subject of the biography felt like this or did the biographer feel like this, at frequent points throughout the narration. Further, the biographer has to keep in mind the boundaries that he cannot cross while narrating someone else's life, thus he has to take into consideration the individual's standing, and posthumous reputation and respect his/her privacy, this might at several points cause a hindrance to the very purpose of writing a biography since the biographer might not have the freedom to disclose some 'important'—from the biographer's point of view and for the readers to know—aspects of the individual's life. This therefore complicates the process of writing a biography and brings into question the very need of this genre where a second person is describing the life of another person in his words through which one might never get a complete picture of the individual but only commend the discerning quality of the writer and his flawless ability to put down difficult things into words. Right from the use of language—construction of sentences, use of particular verbs, adjectives, describing the details of something/someone, etc.—to placing the events in a certain order and including/excluding certain facts, biographic writing puts the author, the subject of the work and the reader in a complicated yet flexible situation where each party is unsure of what the work reveals and what it hides—the actual subject will hide certain details of his life (which might be important) which he does not want to be 'published,' the author would try to explain certain events and experiences the way he saw it and the reader, although gets the required

‘information’ about the individual, remains uncertain about whether what the biographer has written about the subject is true and whether the events happened in the same manner as described by the author. The ethics of writing a biography sometimes impede its very purpose and also raise doubts regarding the omnipresent subject of the work whose ‘language’ and authority remain absent throughout the work. While it is of utmost importance to respect a person’s privacy it is also important to note that the person and in turn the biographer deliberately leave out certain details that they consider ‘private’ but might be helpful for the readers to understand the true nature of the individual and his/her life,

An assessment of where the boundaries lie and what considerations should be taken must be weighed against the importance of the knowledge that is acquired. From experience, the most sensitive topics in biographical research have been linked to various kinds of breaches of norms related to sexuality, disease, and deceit. What is regarded as normal is generally included, even though it is deemed to be private. [...] there may be wide societal interest in gaining more knowledge about certain individuals and their role in history. Researchers must assess the importance and relevance of the themes they focus on in light of the damage they may inflict on the subject of the biography and that person’s close family. (Hagemann)

Biographies thus become a problematic genre of life-writing as they describe a person’s life from the perspective of another person who is a ‘close’ acquaintance of the subject of the biography. While all kinds of biographies invite certain skeptical responses, biographies of particular infamous individuals—criminals and terrorists—increase the complication level of this genre. Some of the most immediate questions that are put in response to this particular type of life-writing are, why does one need to write and read about the life of someone who is a murderer or a rapist? Who is the intended audience of such biographies? Is the author’s purpose to gain sympathy for the subject by portraying the subject’s life ‘before’ he became a criminal? Do these types of biographies serve as ‘warnings’ and ‘preventive guides’ to protect oneself? How can the author who was in close contact with the subject (who is a criminal) be trusted? Is the author even presenting the whole story?

The criminal biography was a popular genre of literature in England throughout the eighteenth century and according to Pongor’s article titled “Criminal Biography: Critical Edition, A Literary Study of the Transport Revolution and Turnpike Riots in 18th Century England” it played the following role,

The purpose of these accounts was mainly twofold: to teach its readers moral lessons by illustrating the consequences of vice and impiety and also to inform and warn its readers of specific criminal methods of fraud, robbery, etc. for their own future security. However, the tone of these accounts reveals that they often served as a form of entertainment rather than moral stipulation. (Pongor 1)

However, in that period the stories of criminals were sought by independent publishers whose only source of acquiring information regarding the criminals was the Ordinary of Newgate Prison in London, the Ordinary was the chaplain of the prison who was responsible for providing spiritual guidance to convicts condemned to death, and he often published 'his' accounts of certain notorious convicts to the public following their execution, thus even at that point the 'authenticity' of the accounts could not be ascertained—not that it bothered the people of that time who were more interested in the 'story' of the convicts—since they were not “autobiographical texts, but rather written and edited by the Ordinary with an intended purpose and audience” (Pongor 1). Although the Ordinary's narrative of the criminals does provide useful insights into the daily lives and struggles of the people of the eighteenth century and also sheds light on the justice system of that time, it is in actuality a second-hand narrative, whose credibility is questionable. In the twenty-first century readers especially, scholars use criminal biographies as “case studies of particular crimes, criminals and social behaviours” (Pongor 1), and “critically reflect on the causes of crime and the implications of punishment (particularly capital punishment) by placing these texts within the greater historical landscape” (Pongor 1). In the present time, researchers and academicians have started examining criminal biographies from several perspectives to understand this unusual yet riveting form of life writing; some of the points that are or can be raised while analyzing such works revolve around the author's position, the subject's position, narration style, role of memory, source of information, truth, addressee of the work and veracity of the events narrated by the writer.

Infamous personalities from all over the world have managed to make their way into the literary world through various forms of life writing—autobiographies, biographies, letters, memoirs, etc.—which have gained popularity among readers; from robbers and gang members to serial killers and terrorists, writers all over the globe have produced a good number of biographies on almost every 'type' of outlaw and criminal. The life and crimes of one such criminal that still haunts the American population have been recorded by Ann Rule (1931-2015), an ex-law enforcement officer who is today well recognized as one of the most prominent writers of 'true-crime' books. Of all the books of Rule, her biographical account of

America's most 'beloved' serial killer Theodore Robert Bundy (Ted Bundy) remains her most enthralling work to date. Ted Bundy, a charming, intelligent, and articulate man remembered to date as one of the most exciting and infamous personalities in the criminal world, was responsible for the kidnap, rape, and murder of at least thirty females (the exact number still not known) in seven states of the United States between the years 1974 and 1978. Given Ted's bewitching personality and his engrossing life as a criminal, writers and filmmakers have and continue to produce books and films on the subject focusing on different aspects of his life. Ann Rule's book appropriately titled *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980) is one of the earliest and foremost works of the 'Ted Bundy archives.'

Ann Rule had met Ted Bundy while volunteering at a Suicide Crisis Clinic in Seattle in 1971 where Bundy was a work-study student studying psychology at the University of Washington. Over time Rule and Bundy developed a close friendship, sharing meals and intimate conversations about friends and family, Rule being almost a decade older than Bundy was almost like a sister/mother figure for Bundy with whom, he could share anything. The two however fell out of contact in late 1973 after Ted left the crisis centre. *The Stranger Beside Me* is therefore simply not just a biography of Ted Bundy but also a semi-autobiography of Ann Rule herself, the book can be termed as a 'memoir biography' as the author simultaneously provides accounts of her own life experiences that entwined with that of the subject's life. Given the nature of the author's connection with the subject, the character of the subject, and the quantity of details and facts supplied in the narrative, the work brings up several topics and issues that need to be dealt with in detail.

The very first difficulty that one would face while going through such a narration is to determine the position of the narrator/author herself, where should one place Ann Rule, one of the very few people who had been in touch with Ted before and after he was incriminated and arrested for the kidnapping and murder of several women, in the whole 'Ted Bundy biography?' The voice and conscience of the author keep fluctuating throughout the narrative and one can identify three distinct phases through which she passes, first is the 'attachment phase' in which Rule, based on the close relationship that she had maintained with Ted and her evaluation of Ted's character frequently praises Ted's qualities, does not acknowledge the fact that Ted might have committed rape/murders and has complete faith in his innocence,

Until *I* [Italics not mine] have proof that Ted was guilty of this, and perhaps of other crimes, I would wait. [...] Sitting there in that airless cubicle, I was once again on his [Ted's] side. He seemed too frail and beleaguered by forces over which he had no control. And yet the charisma was still there. I *believed* [Italics, not mine] his position. He was the man he'd always been, but he was in a situation that had no relevance to the real Ted inside. [...] Ted had pulled himself together now, an effort that would never fail to make me pause and consider the ability he had to do that. He could somehow manage to recoup and recover under such tremendous stress and adjust to each new situation. (Rule 336-351)

This is then followed by the 'skeptical phase' when Rule starts thinking about the possibility of Ted being a murderer but is still attached to him emotionally and finds it difficult to come to terms with the fact that Ted, a beloved friend, a brother whom she cherished was a serial killer,

I was shocked, relieved, incredulous—and then, I remembered the single clipping I'd seen about the Chi Omega murders in Florida. [...] the details—all the details of the Florida cases—would become known to me over the next eighteen months, but I had a terrible feeling that Ted Bundy was inextricably bound up with those murders on the campus of Florida State University. Until that point, I had always nourished a small hope that the police, the media and the public might be wrong in their assumption that Ted was a killer. Now, knowing he was in Florida, that hope crumbled. (Rule 482-483)

and at last, comes the 'acceptance phase' where Ann realizes that Ted was indeed a cold-blooded murderer who used her (just like he did many other women) for his interests and at this point one finds a change in the tone and writing style of the author which becomes bitter, critical and unapologetic,

[...] like all the others, I have been manipulated to suit Ted's needs. [...] in reality, Ted loved *things* [Italics not mine] more than he loved people. He could find life in an abandoned bicycle or an old car, and feel a kind of compassion for these inanimate objects, more compassion than he could ever feel for another human being.

[...] On the surface Ted Bundy was the very epitome of a successful man. Inside, it was all ashes.

For Ted has gone through life terribly crippled, like a man who is deaf, or blind, or paralyzed. Ted has no conscience. (Rule 599-600)

However apart from these three clear phases, there are (many) other instances in the narration in which the author swings back and forth between sympathizing with Ted and treating him as a cold-blooded predator, leaving the readers—especially those who are already aware of the fact that Ted Bundy was indeed the person behind all the killings and kidnappings mentioned in the narrative—in a frustrated and exhausted state that results from the author’s vacillating attitude and her inability to acknowledge the fact that her ‘friend’ was a criminal, despite being an ex-cop herself and belonging to a family whose members had also been a part of law enforcement. Throughout the work Ann Rule is never clear about her stance, till the very last sentence of the book she hovers between extremes and tries to understand Ted’s condition and his motives behind committing such heinous murders, throughout the narrative she never truly disregards him as ‘just’ a ‘maniacal criminal,’ nor does she provide a convincing defense for Ted’s criminality. This attitude of Rule is understandable given her close association with the subject, however, this puts the author of this criminal biography under suspicion as the narrative provides a biased account of the subject, and is ambiguous—the author circles around Ted being innocent and Ted being a serial killer—and does not provide the readers with the actual information which they are seeking—the reason behind Ted’s actions—since the author, who is herself manipulated by the subject, does not know anything about that either. Thus, the credibility of the author who is aware of only one side of the subject (Ted) is brought into question, making the readers doubtful about the things narrated by a person who being an ex-cop got so easily manipulated by a dangerous killer and did not even get a hint of his sneaky nature (even after much time of his arrest). Concerning this Ann’s whole purpose in writing the book is itself a mystery, this narrative of Ted Bundy provides snippets of Ted’s family background, the whole chronological history of the court cases and trials against Ted, and shows the inept nature of Ann Rule at judging people—something that she proudly considers as one of her best qualities. The book is subtitled “The True Crime Story of Ted Bundy,” the oxymoron ‘true’ and ‘story’ problematizes the whole idea behind writing this book, the narrative provides a range of facts and minute details regarding Ted’s killings, his trials at court, the description of victims, etc. making it as ‘true’ as possible, but the way the author narrates and draws an incomplete picture of Ted Bundy, who is described as a charismatic, intelligent person, a student of psychology and law who fools women (including a female ex-cop for

years), prowls the streets and alleys to find potential victims and owns a Volkswagen Beetle that has no passenger seat, almost sounds like a well-fabricated story.

According to psychoanalysis no person can truly completely recognize or define himself since a large portion of our selves is hidden in the unconscious, thus every individual himself/herself is not clearly aware of his/her own 'true' nature, how can a second person correctly assess what or who they are? This puts the biographical genre, especially the sub-genre of criminal biography in a much tricky position where it is not clear whether the author's account of the subject is true or is it just the author's own analysis of the subject as she saw him from the outside, in that case, whose life is being narrated in biographies, the subject's or the author's? In *The Stranger beside Me* the author fails at multiple fronts, first she inadvertently posits herself as someone, who despite belonging to a profession and having multiple degrees in areas that are based on mastering the skill of 'evaluating' people, can be easily manipulated and fooled by a stranger thereby raising doubts concerning the reliability of the narrative, second, throughout the whole narrative Rule herself remains confused, third her account of Ted Bundy's life is neither a defence of his criminality nor is it an attack on it, and finally, if she composed this work with an objective to describe Ted Bundy as a normal man (minus his criminal nature), then she fails at that too because what she portrays is just one side (or face) of Bundy that he put up to con women, and Rule could never quite grasp (or even get familiar with) the other, the more devious side of Ted, thus one would never know whether the picture of Ted that Rule draws is the actual Ted or the one that she does not draw (one that she herself is not aware of) is the true Ted Bundy which the readers will never get to know. The problem in this particular criminal biography is intensified because of the multiplex character of the subject himself, throughout the work right from Ann Rule, Ted's mother, his cousins and schoolmates to his girlfriend (s), neighbors, detectives, cops, media persons and psychotherapists who examined him, everyone had something or the other to say about Ted's personality, thus let alone Ann Rule, Ted himself could have never known who or what he truly was! Rule's biography only succeeds at bringing all these views and opinions of different people on Ted into one frame leaving the readers to guess which of the analyses of Ted describes his person most appropriately thus constructing Ted's identity as 'subjective'—every reader according to his/her own judgment can pick one interpretation (of Ted's character) out of the many provided by Rule in the book and picture Ted as that person! Rule's biography on Ted reduces the (criminal) biographic genre to a form of writing that only provides factual information regarding the subject, where the author provides a detailed account of the physical

appearances of the victims, their family backgrounds, the manner in which they were killed, timings of events, dates when the subjects' (in this case Ted's) trials were held, statements of witnesses, prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, and a lot of other numerical and medical data that the author had somehow access to. The book, given its pertinent title, warns all women to be careful of 'all' strangers (no matter how attractive and decent they might seem to be) but it also at the same time inadvertently puts 'every' man (despite his looks and educational background) under suspicion, making women 'extra-cautious,' pessimistic and skeptical about every man around them.

The Stranger Beside Me is also a 'semi-autobiography' that somewhat deals more with the author's journey from disbelief to belief, from denial to acceptance, rather than Ted Bundy's life story. The work when seen from a particular standpoint appears to be Ann Rule's confession on how she befriended a stranger, confided in him, and trusted him only to realize in the end that she had been fooled and manipulated by that same person. More than an account of the famous 'Ted Bundy' the work seems to be a means for Rule to come to terms with the horrible fact that a person whom she loved like a brother (her own brother had committed suicide, so Ted had a special place in her heart) turned out to be a ruthless murderer and that she, being an ex-cop failed terribly in recognizing the true nature of the 'stranger beside' her. Rule herself puts herself in a difficult position while outlining the purpose of writing down such crime narratives, initially, she states that,

When I began writing fact-detective stories, I promised myself that I would always remember I was writing about the loss of human beings, that I was never to forget that. I hoped that the work I did might somehow save other victims, might warn them of the danger. I never wanted to become tough, to seek out the sensational and the gory, and I never have. [...] I have met many parents of victims, cried with them, and yet I have somehow felt guilt—because I make my living from other people's tragedies. (Rule 141)

The author's sincere and sensible attitude is revealed in the above-mentioned passage where she highlights her purpose of writing criminal stories 'to save others' and the apparent 'guilt' that she feels for taking advantage of the loss of others are all brought under question once she starts admitting how her writings and interviews on Ted were an important source of income for her and her family and how she became excited when a Hollywood production company approached her for Ted's story,

One of my magazine articles had sparked the interest of a Hollywood production company and, after two brief phone calls, I found myself on a plane headed for Los Angeles. After a daylong meeting, it was agreed that I would return for three weeks in December to write the screen “treatment” of the story. I was thrilled, terrified, and unable to believe what had happened. After six years of making an adequate, but somewhat precarious, living for us, I could glimpse an easier life ahead. (Rule 410)

Rule's excitement resembles that of a struggling actor who after years of waiting gets to sign his first big film. The manner in which the sentences have been framed in the above passage unwittingly conveys the meaning that Rule too had been waiting for her ‘big’ achievement in writing, and at this moment, she finally gets the opportunity not only to fly to Hollywood but to be a part of a huge project that would ensure a steady supply of money. Unfortunately, the compromise between ‘doing good’ and providing for one's family that is made by almost all (middle-class) people jeopardizes Rule's disposition as a writer as well as a person, where she initially claimed to be writing this story to prevent others from falling victims to traps but with time that purpose became overshadowed by the desire to earn money for her family through her works. Though this does not taint Rule's character—as she was a single divorced mother of two daughters who had no ‘proper’ job and writing was her only means of earning a living for her family, and therefore her situation and excitement are understandable and any other person in her place would go through similar emotions—but it is terribly unclear whether an author who ‘used’ her close association with someone else and ‘someone else's life’ as the subject of her writing and then as a means to earn money could be trusted when it comes to her narrative account, because when the author repeatedly mentions her pathetic financial conditions in the narrative and admits that her writings on the subject helped in ameliorating those conditions one wonders whether some of the content might have been ‘created’ by the author to increase the sales of her book, this further adds to the hindrances to the development of trust between the readers and the author. When Ted in one of his letters to Rule quite bluntly states “Since you have seen fit to take advantage of our relationship, I think it only fair that you share your great good fortune with my wife, Carole Ann Boone” (Rule 639), Rule (in a kind of annoying tone) follows up with a range of justifications and explanations about how she had helped Ted and how she had taken permission from him for writing about him, etc. ending with “For six years, I didn't write to Ted again. Nor he to me” (Rule 641), while her irritated tone was partially caused by Ted's arrogant attitude, one wonders

if it was also a result of Ted's forthright manner of stating something that was absolutely true—profiting from the life story of someone with whom you once shared an intimate bond—which Rule herself knew but never consciously acknowledged, and when Ted put it down brusquely it was as if Rule's improbity had suddenly been revealed to her. Rule's motive for writing the book takes a more personalized form when towards the end of the book she states that writing down about everything that she had lived with Ted had been a source of relief for her, "The relief that I felt when I wrote the last line was immense. This book was a healing catharsis after a half-dozen years of horror" (Rule 623). So, was the whole idea behind writing the book to reach this point of relief and catharsis? This leads one back to the previous argument about the narrative being a means through which Rule 'comes to terms' with the unpleasant truths surrounding Ted and their relationship. Rule's admittance of the fact that despite writing a whole lot about Ted and everything she had been through with him, and because of him, some significant part of her consciousness would always be "inhabited by Ted Bundy and his crimes, for as long as I live," confirms that the book had been in part a means to process her thoughts about everything relating to Ted and this also leads one to further question whether the author successfully managed to put down 'everything,' or if the agitating nature of her experience of being in close association with one of the most heinous criminals in history made her unconsciously lock away certain facts, events and details.

Though Ann Rule's biography being the first and the most popular work among the plethora of literary and artistic reproductions of Ted Bundy's life story does provide a comprehensive account of the major events that took place in Ted's life, the nature of relationship of the author with the subject and the impaired proficiency of the author at recognizing people raises questions regarding the credibility of the account she provides. The subsequent revisions of *The Stranger Beside Me* published in 1986, 1989, 2000 and 2008 only confirm that the author keeps adding/amending the narrative as she remembers new facts or comes across new pieces of evidence and accounts further putting her and her narration under suspicion, and obviously one can deduce from this that Rule's account of Ted Bundy's life might never be complete and perfectly reliable. The book on the one hand does provide the details about Ted Bundy's life as a student, intern, lover, serial killer, famed criminal, husband, and father but by the end of the narration, the work feels to be an effort on the part of the author to deal with her own disquietude. The author's close association with the subject makes the book a story about Ann Rule's life in which Ted Bundy is a major character instead of being the other way around, thus the balance between the biographical and semi-autobiographical

aspects of the work is not steady but keeps tilting throughout the narration wherein the author is simultaneously narrating events happening in her own life, incidents in Ted Bundy's life and the experiences of both of them that are intermingled with each other. The author's position as the biographer of Ted Bundy's life is indecisive and her account of the subject's life seems doubtful since despite being an ex-cop and having several degrees in fields that are particularly concerned with understanding human behavior, the author proves to be incompetent. The fact that she is manipulated and fooled by the subject raises doubts regarding the very 'story' that she is narrating, her (apparent) motive behind writing the book to earn a living, and her hesitancy in accepting Ted as a brutal killer despite knowing the facts, augment the confusion surrounding the author's biased narrative. The biographical mode, the equivocal style of the author's narration where she constantly wavers between multiple positions, and the enigmatic nature of Ted Bundy himself does not clearly bring out the complete picture of Ted Bundy, the person. The narrative is well supplied with facts, testimonies, and interpretations of numerous victims, friends, family members, psychoanalysts, local workers, and law enforcement people, all of whom provide a rough sketch of Ted Bundy, his actions, behavior, and character, but the work being a 'biography,' misses a lot of details, leaves gaps and raises doubts regarding the author's description of the true personality and the events in the life of one of the most famous serial killers. Thus, the author's own limited understanding of the subject makes the readers a little skeptical and leaves them with numerous questions regarding Bundy that they might never find answers to, and one wonders whether Ted himself would have been capable enough of providing a 'true' account of 'himself' had he written his own autobiography!

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