

the unsung, the workaday people we pass on the street and barely take the trouble to notice?

Most lives vanish. A person dies, and little by little all traces of that life disappear. An inventor survives in his inventions, an architect survives in his buildings, but most people leave behind no monuments or lasting achievements: a shelf of photograph albums, a fifth-grade report card, a bowling trophy, an ashtray filched from a Florida hotel room on the final morning of some dimly remembered vacation. A few objects, a few documents, and a smattering of impressions made on other people. Those people invariably tell stories about the dead person, but more often than not dates are scrambled, facts are left out, and the truth becomes increasingly distorted, and when those people die in their turn, most of the stories vanish with them.

My idea was this: to form a company that would publish books about the forgotten ones, to rescue the stories and facts and documents before they disappeared – and shape them into a continuous narrative, the narrative of a life.

The biographies would be commissioned by friends and relatives of the subject, and the books would be printed in small, private editions – anywhere from fifty to three or four hundred copies. I imagined writing the books myself, but if demand ever became too heavy, I could always hire others to help with the work: struggling poets and novelists, ex-journalists, unemployed academics.

Was I crazy to dream that I could make something of this far-fetched project? I didn't think so. What young woman wouldn't want to read the definitive biography of her father – even if that father had been no more than a factory worker or the assistant manager of a rural bank? What mother wouldn't want to read the life story of her policeman son who was shot down in the line of duty at age thirty-four? In every case, it would have to be a question of love. A wife or a husband, a son or a daughter, a parent, a brother or a sister – only the strongest attachments. They would come to me six months or a year after the subject had died. They would have absorbed the death by then, but they still wouldn't be over it, and now that everyday life had started for them again, they would understand that they would never be over it. They would want to bring their loved one back to life, and I would do everything humanly possible to grant their wish. I would resurrect that person in words, and once the pages had been printed and the story had been bound between covers, they would have something to hold on to for the rest of their lives. Not only that, but something that would outlive them, that would outlive us all.

One should never underestimate the power of books.

Eventually, we would all die, and when our bodies were carried off and buried in the ground, only our friends and families would know we were gone. Our deaths wouldn't be announced on radio or television. There wouldn't be any obituaries in the *New York Times*. No books would be written about us. That is an honor reserved for the powerful and famous, for the exceptionally talented, but who bothers to publish biographies of the ordinary,