

**THE CASEBOOK OF
VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN
BY PETER ACKROYD**

**Biographical Paper
By Jay Siegel
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Peter Ackroyd was once asked what he did outside of writing. Ackroyd replied:" I drink, that's about it." However, considering his prodigious body of work, it doesn't seem likely that he has had much of a chance to assuage his thirst. He has written four volumes of poetry, eighteen novels, thirty-eight non-fiction books and six television scripts. Along the way, he has received thirteen honours or awards, all while holding down a day job for much of that time.

Ackroyd was born in London on October 5,1949 and raised on a government subsidised housing facility in a strict Roman Catholic household by his mother and grandmother after his father had abandoned the family. Ackroyd subsequently attended Cambridge from which he graduated with a double first in English literature. At the age of 23, he was awarded a fellowship at Yale University. Afterwards, he returned to London where he worked at *The Spectator* magazine for some ten years, first as a literary editor and then as joint managing editor. He then worked as chief book reviewer for *The Times* as well as doing frequent radio broadcasts.

Ackroyd claims that he was first aware that he was gay at the precocious age of seven years old. When at Yale, he began what became a long term relationship that didn't end until his partner died of AIDS in1994. The two of them had previously moved to Devon

after Ackroyd had suffered a nervous breakdown. In 1999, Ackroyd barely managed to survive a major heart attack.

From the very beginning of his creative career, Ackroyd only wanted to be a poet. In fact, his first two published books were works of poetry, But then, while at Yale, he wrote an essay (later published) that I think changed his outlook. The Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that in this essay, "Ackroyd attacked contemporary English literature and the literary establishment and dismissed conventional realistic fiction as no longer useful." In fact, Ackroyd later said " . . . I can't bear fiction. I hate it. It's so untidy." He continued, saying " . . . I never thought I'd be a novelist. . . and I don't think I ever read a novel 'til I was about 26 or 27." But despite the anti-fiction message of that Yale essay, it appears to me that Ackroyd was now beginning to rearrange his artistic sensibilities away from poetry and toward, yes, fiction writing. In her Critical Paper, Marie will tell us much more about the narrative style that Ackroyd now began to create.

But what about Ackroyd's thirty-eight books of non-fiction, which include both histories and biographies? In 2011, at the age of 63, he realized a life-long desire when he wrote the first volume of his history of England. By 2018, he had completed the fifth of this series that covers English history from Stonehenge to the twentieth century. Each volume is a highly readable narrative history filled with many riveting details that display a serious level of scholarship. His other earlier histories, let's say, are far more creative. They include titles such as *London: The Biography*, *Thames: sacred river* and *London Under*, among others. Ackroyd has a somewhat mystical view of London. Many of his histories, as well as much of his work in general, revolve around this city which is

evoked as both a physical place and as a mysterious metaphor, inhabited by its past and by its characters. Ackroyd has remarked that "is it not also possible that within this city and within its culture are patterns of sensibility or patterns of response which have persisted from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and perhaps even beyond?"

Ackroyd's London bias also influenced his selection of biographical subjects. They include, among others, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Charles Dickens and notably William Blake. As in his histories, his mystical approach also surfaces in many of these works. He once commented that "I truly believe that there are certain people to whom or through whom the territory, the place, the past speaks." Also, in keeping with that mystical sensibility, Ackroyd chooses William Blake, a quasi-mystic himself, as "the most powerful and most significant philosopher or thinker in the course of English history."

To conclude, I'd like to quote the following entry from the British Council:

In his varied and prolific output, Ackroyd has attained both critical acclaim and popularity amongst the reading public: whether he is writing fiction or nonfiction he undertakes extensive, meticulous research, producing work that is extremely knowledgeable and scholarly, yet he combines this intellectualism with a lively imaginative flair, and an ability to present complex information and multi-faceted stories in an accessible, entertaining style.