Deirdre Bair is the critically acclaimed author of five award winning biographies. She received the National Book Award for *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* and her biography of *Simone de Beauvoir* was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and was chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the "Best Books of the Year." Her biography of *Anais Nin* was also chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the "Best Books of the Year." Ms. Bair's biography of *C.J. Jung* won the Gradiva Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis and was also a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize.

Bair's biography of *Saul Steinberg*, published by Nan A. Talese at Doubleday, on November 20th, has met with outstanding reviews. *Publisher's Weekly* states, "The pre-eminent *New Yorker* cartoonist leads a life worthy of his own ironic art in this scintillating biography... Bair's long and amply researched biography unfurls in a graceful prose that's stocked with absurdist scenes and colorful characters... Her breezy writing works subtly and slyly to unearth psychological depths beneath that amusing surface of the Steinbergian picaresque."

In this interview, Ms. Bair, a member of the NYC chapter of the WNBA shares some of her stories and insights on writing about Saul Steinberg and her other subjects, and tells us a little bit about what she is working on next.

*Thank you, Deirdre, for agreeing to do this interview. I am thrilled that another one of your biographies was recently published. I am always amazed by the depth and breadth of your biographies, so, to start this interview, I thought I would ask you how you prepare yourself to write about the life of another person. Are there certain stages that you go through during the writing process?*

It's difficult to answer your question because the life of every person I have written about was so different from the others that each book required its own specific technique. For some books, I felt I had to complete the research before I could even think about starting to write; for others I wrote certain passages that seemed alive and fresh to me at the time, and almost always, I had to rewrite them because subsequent research proved that they needed some degree of moderation, if not almost total change. I suppose the short answer is that I try to know as much about the subject's life as possible so that when I am starting to write it, I can structure all my responses to various parts of it accordingly.

*What was it in particular about Steinberg's life and work that drew you to write his first biography? Why did you think it was important for his story to be told?*

Like many other Americans in the last half of the twentieth century, I grew up eagerly awaiting the arrival of *The New Yorker* each week. Back when there was no table of contents, I think a lot of people must have done what I did, to flip through the pages scanning the titles of articles and glancing at the end to see who wrote them while giving my initial attention to the drawings and cartoons. And from the quantity of fan mail the magazine received, I don't think I was the only one who stopped fanning the pages to study whenever Saul Steinberg contributed to an issue. His work always got my attention, and nine times out of ten, my first response was the same puzzled question: "Just what did he mean by that?" All those numbers, letters, squiggles, and curlicues; those funny animals and ferocious figures; the brutalist buildings, tranquil landscapes, and chaotic street scenes -- what was he getting at? And as for "that poster," the iconic "View from 9th Avenue" dubbed by me and countless others "The New Yorker's View of the
World," I am sure I was among the first delighted buyers who rushed to the store on Madison Avenue for a copy that has hung in every house I've lived in since then.

When I became a university professor, my office bulletin board was festooned with Steinberg's covers, most of them the ones containing words that I used to try to inspire my students to think. There was the one that showed a man standing between two signs, one pointing to "before" and the other to "after." There was the one with all versions of the verb "to be," and the one that proclaimed "I do." "I have," and "I am." And whenever student assignments were due and I knew I'd be deluged by requests for extensions, I'd send a message by posting one of my favorite cartoons on the office door, of the man who sits behind the desk beaming as the word "NO" floats above his head and over to the deflated supplicant who sits in front of him.

In my home office, ever since I was a graduate student in Paris years ago and I went without lunches to buy it, a Steinberg print has hung on the wall where my eyes naturally gravitate when I raise them from my work. It has floated above every desk since the days when my ancient typewriter gave way to a succession of computers because I always found something soothing in it throughout my daily struggle for whatever words or thoughts were eluding me. I still don't know what there is about this print, one of his landscapes from the era of The Passport that is endlessly fascinating. It just is.

That vague generality pretty much characterized my overall response to Saul Steinberg's art until early 2007, when I saw two exhibitions of his work, at the Morgan Library and Museum, and the Museum of the City of New York. I spent so much time studying the drawings and trying to puzzle out what inspired him to create them that the friends who were with me grew tired of waiting and were leaving without me when I called them back to tell them I thought I'd found what I'd been missing all those years. I had just read a caption that quoted Steinberg as having said, "I am a writer who draws." That was it, of course, the elusive key that opened the first of the many doors that led me to spend several magical years searching for an understanding of his oeuvre.

On my way out of the Morgan Museum, I bought the book that accompanied the exhibition and when I got home I put it beside the four others of his drawings that were already on my library shelves. One by one I took them down again, once more finding puzzle and pleasure in equal part. Several months later when I was packing books and files for a household move, I came across a huge folder left over from my teaching days that contained all the Steinbergiana that had adorned the walls and bulletin boards of my various offices. For the first time I was aware of the variety of his output, from The New Yorker covers to product advertisements. I had saved an old Hallmark calendar and one leftover Christmas card from those he drew for the Museum of Modern Art. There was even a photo of a funny looking fellow with a moustache and black-framed glasses holding a tiny brown paper mask over his nose that I now knew was Saul Steinberg himself. How many years had I saved all this? It was hard to remember when I started, or even why. I knew nothing about the artist's life when I collected all these things and until that moment, had never considered finding out who he was, where he came from, or why he made such an impact upon his culture and society. At that time, I really believed that I would never write another biography, but thoughts about Saul Steinberg persisted, and almost before I could verbalize what they were, I knew that I wanted to write about him. One thing led to another, and that was the start of this biography. Several years later, the end result is here.

You poured through over 170 boxes of previously unseen documents and 400 drawings that Steinberg had bequeathed to Yale's Beinecke Library in order to write this book. What kinds of challenges and opportunities does that present to a biographer?

"How can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes full of tailors' bills, love letters, and old picture postcards?" asked Virginia Woolf as she struggled to write the biography of Roger Fry. I had to laugh when I read this, thinking what an easy time she must have had with only enough written information to give her the basic outline of the life so that she was free to fill in the rest of it with sources other than what he left behind. I laughed because I had just finished more than five months of going to Yale's Beinecke Library every single day, to sit there from the time it opened until the late afternoon when my eyes gave out, to read the 172 boxes (or was it 177? The number kept changing as the staff kept rearranging) that Saul Steinberg bequeathed to the university -- and the boxes did not include the more than 400 drawings that he left to Yale's museum and art gallery, so that required an altogether different kind of looking and studying.

When I had been reading the boxes for two full months, I wasn't laughing -- I was groaning when I realized I was only up to Box 38 and I came across a notebook where Steinberg had jotted down some notes to himself. Entitled
"What I learned from Artists," the first item on his list was "From [Marcel] Duchamp: answer or throw away immediately all mail as soon as it arrives (I never followed this advice)." Why, I asked in the midst of my groaning, why oh why didn't Steinberg follow Duchamps' advice!

In short, on a spectrum of the biographer's main nightmare, information or the lack thereof, I was at the opposite end from Virginia Woolf: I was literally drowning in an avalanche of letters; photos; souvenirs of his travels; collections of historical postcards, comic books; maps; tax receipts for every year of his life as a United States citizen; publishing contracts; ticket stubs for everything from airplanes to movies; business cards. Well, I could go on and on but I'll stop here. Other biographers tell stories of how they are so involved with their subject that they dream about them; I always sat quietly while they talked because I've never had such dreams until this book. My recurring dream was never about Saul Steinberg per se, it was always about my being unable to run fast enough to escape from the avalanche of paper that was about to smother me, or else I was swimming and could never rise to the surface above a sea of documents.

I found it exceedingly curious that Steinberg, who lived like the maxim in a novel by his friend Donald Barthelme: "Try to be a man about whom nothing is known," still kept for posterity -- and with reverence in doing so -- every scrap of paper he ever doodled on or came across. What compelled him to keep the artifacts, mementos, even the detritus of the parts of a life he preferred not to remember? Why did he keep letters that showed unpleasant aspects of his personality, or occasional diary-like confessions in which he revealed how coldly nasty, even sadistic, he could be? But that was not the only side of Saul Steinberg, as I found out when I read the bulging files containing the many encomia that came his way, from honors and prizes to grateful letters from recipients of his gracious and generous charitable giving. Even before it became a cause, he supported civil rights in the American South, he gave generously to every Jewish organization that asked, and when it was not politically expedient to support liberal and leftist causes, he did so.

All of this "matter of life," as I call it, informs his work. On the jacket of one of his books, The Labyrinth, he described how everything he ever drew came straight from his own biography. He was famous for his "line," the firm black ink that can begin as a straight line before suddenly morphing into the squiggles of an artist creating his own nightmare vision, or a single line that shows a town above and below water, or a collection of buildings that represent ominous changes in urban society, or a collective of what appears at first glance little chicken-scratches but that become on closer examination a dark version of modern man walking in lock-step through the dreariness of modern life.

"I am a writer who draws," Steinberg said of himself. Indeed, every drawing is a miniature biography, not only of himself but of the society he reflects. Born in Romania, he was educated in Italy where he was already famous as a cartoonist before World War II forced him, as a stateless Jew, into immigrating to the United States. On a single day, he became a United States citizen, a commissioned officer in the United States Navy, and a member of the O.S.S., the precursor of the modern CIA. And because he spoke Romanian, German, Italian, French, a bit of Spanish and broken English, the government in its infinite wisdom sent him to China.

When the war was over, he settled in New York and became the quintessential American as he explored and investigated his adopted culture and society, crisscrossing the country on buses and trains, going to the deep south and the far west to see for himself what it was all about. No other artist in the last half of the twentieth century has presented its history with so much prescience, insight, and vision. In his drawings and in the many bits and snatches of autobiographical writing that he left behind in his 177 boxes, Steinberg talks about all these things that went into making him the man and the artist that he was. "Nothing that has been deposited in the memory is lost," he wrote. "Memory is a computer that all one's life goes on accumulating data which are not always used, since man is often like an ocean liner that sets sail with only a single cabin occupied."

Steinberg may have sailed alone, but he filled up all the other cabins with material that he visited repeatedly on his voyages, and for the past three years, he has allowed me to make repeated crossings with him. Having written this book, my particular ship has docked; I'm getting off so that others can get on and make their own fascinating trips with him.
I understand that you just signed with Nan Talese at Random House to write your next biography on none other than Al Capone. This seems a bit of a departure from your previous work in terms of the type of person you have written about. How did doing a biography of Al Capone come about?

When I tell people I am writing about Al Capone, their faces either take on a look of sheer astonishment, or else they giggle nervously before asking the same question you have asked, that after all my more "hifalutin" subjects, how did I come to take on a Chicago gangster. The working title of the book is Al Capone: His Life and His Legacy, and here is how it started.

Last winter, a friend in the publishing world called to pick my brain. Her brother, a lawyer, represented some of the descendants of Al Capone. He told his sister that certain branches of the Capone family were distressed by some recent publications that claimed to be the "real story" about Public Enemy #1, the most famous gangster in America, and if the number of daily hits on Google search are correct, one of the most (in)famous men known throughout the world. These descendants wanted to tell the truth about Al as they knew him, and they wondered if the lawyer could help them find a writer.

Did they want an "as told to" story? Did they want a ghost writer? Did they want someone who would popularize (if not sensationalize) Al's life? Or did they want a scholar, and if so, I couldn't help them there because I knew nothing about Al or his historical times. I asked my friend to find out what they wanted and if I could have an idea of what it was, then perhaps I could help them.

Some weeks later, the family members arranged a conference call with me. None of them had any experience with writing so I listened carefully as they tried to explain what they wanted. I found myself becoming intrigued as they told me they wanted this book to happen at this particular time because the old timers in the family, those between the ages of eighty and over ninety who were alive in Al's lifetime and knew him well, were all dying, and with them, their stories. They invited me to go to Chicago on a frigid February weekend to get to know them and to hear their stories for myself. I found myself entranced as I sat at their table, loaded with the glorious food Italian-Americans enjoy when they get together, and as I listened to their personal memories of Al, saw their photographs and other memorabilia, and heard their versions of his public life. I knew there was a book here, not only about Al's public life but also about the private one he led in his own home and in the homes of his many relatives. And that is why the book's working sub-title is not only His Life but also His Legacy. I am still digesting the life histories of the Capone descendants, so different and so varied, but ultimately so fascinating. In many ways, it will be a cultural history of the Italian-American experience as well as the story of one particular family and how they have to deal with a notorious progenitor every time they give their name. It is so early in my research that, although I can think of many other things the book will become, it is too early to name them now so I will just say it will certainly be biographical but that it will be much else besides.

Did writing about Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir, Anais Nin, and Carl Jung teach you anything about biography that you would like to share with your fellow biographers?

As I reflect upon the reactions I receive when I tell people I am writing about Al Capone, I can't help but think back to when I wrote the biography of Anais Nin. A British reviewer for one of the respected English daily newspapers began her review with "What's a nice girl like Deirdre Bair doing with a silly old cow like Anais Nin?" I was outraged when I read it. Why did this reviewer believe that any one life deserved more respect than another? All my books have begun from a kind of fascination for how the work came to appear in a particular subject's life. Everyone I've written about led a life and produced a body of work that fascinated me (we shall see how this translates into writing about Al Capone). I don't think I could ever write about someone whom I basically did not like, and when I read biographies where the writer clearly detested her subject, I generally don't finish them because I don't believe I can trust them. With all my subjects there has been something, perhaps indefinable in the beginning, about their life and work that made me want to know more about each of them. In Beckett's case I wondered how a well-educated, well-brought-up Anglo-Irish WASP could have created a world of down-and-outers, so unappetizing in so many ways and yet with such universal resonance for us all. With Simone de Beauvoir, it was how could this dutiful daughter of minor nobility, raised in an atmosphere of oppressive social behavior and right-wing political ideology become the feminist icon revered by so many. Nin fascinated me because of her obsessive self-fixation. Having read Beauvoir's four volumes of autobiography that were so different from Nin's seven published diary volumes, I wanted to understand a woman whose only subject was herself. And how did Jung begin? Hard for me to say except that
when a psychologist friend (a Freudian) said the one book his profession desperately needed was an objective biography of Carl Gustav Jung and asked why didn't I write it, my interest was piqued. Initially I rejected it because I hadn't read German since graduate school, but then I remembered how I and so many of my fellow students rejected Freud because we thought he gave short shrift to our half of the human race, and how, if we did employ psychological perspectives in our work, they were usually Jungian. It just seemed that this was the next book I should write.

**What advice would you offer to prospective biographers?**

If I were to offer advice to fellow biographers, I suppose it would be to select a subject or a topic that fascinates you, of a person that you want to know more about and one that you would not mind spending years with in his or her daily company, before you could even think of offering it to the reading public. Another bit of advice would be to realize from the outset that no one life can stand as a model for any other. Each one has to unfold as it was lived, and to try to impose artificial categories upon it will not keep your reader reading. I think of a noted professor back in the days when French critical theory ruled the Academy and biography was anathema. "She's not a scholar; she's only a biographer" was something I heard in my own academic department, about me and other biographers. That same professor was later heard several years later telling a colleague that he, too, was going to write a biography, just as soon as he found a subject that "fit [his] theory." He did write a biography and it sank like a rock, for theory overwhelmed the life.

My way is to write the life as the evidence shows it was lived, and if there is too much about, say childhood, or a particular love affair, or the work that represented the epitome of the subject's creativity -- well then, if that is what mattered in the life and became the major influence on the work, it is the biographer’s obligation to honor it. Life is messy, full of detours and hidden byways, and the biographer often has to get lost as the road map (remember them?) unfolds, but eventually the final destination reveals itself.

Thank you Deirdre for sharing your stories and for the advice you offered to aspiring biographers.

To watch a video interview with Deirdre Bair conducted by former WNBA-NYC president, Karen Livecchia, please go to [WNBA-NYC’s YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id).

Read a review of Deirdre’s new biography of Saul Steinberg in [The New Yorker](https://www.newyorker.com/).