



The Life of Charlotte Brontë

Elizabeth Gaskell

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From Reader Review The Life of Charlotte Brontë for online ebook

Amanda says

DNF at 33%. I had the wrong expectations for this work. This is a collection of letter fragments written by Charlotte Bronte, which Gaskell has curated and contextualized. I was expecting a Gaskell novel about Charlotte Bronte. Gaskell's writing does not shine or entertain in this volume like it does in most of her other works (at least, for me). I may attempt to finish this in the future, now knowing what to expect. I recommend you pick this up if you want to learn about Charlotte Bronte, not if you are a fan of Gaskell's writing. I wanted both, but it turns out the Gaskell part was more important to me at this time.

Sawsan says

Charlotte Bronte one of my favorite authors of classics, i think she's a fascinating person,her writing were emotional and honest reflecting life and people at that time, focusing on moral values and responsibility. i read about her life before but i enjoyed reading this book too
this book is written by her friend Elizabeth Gaskell who used charlotte's letters to her friends to write this biography,the letters showed some aspects of Charlotte's feelings and personality.
Charlotte Bronte lived a hard life, lost her mother and two older sisters while she was a little girl, she became like a mother to her younger sisters, and worked as a governess for almost two years.
the three sisters -Charlotte, Emily, Anne- were talented in writing, they first published their works under pseudonym, and after the success of their novels they revealed their true identities.
she was heartbroken and emotionally disturbed after the death of her brother and sisters Emily and Anne within eight months, but continued writing and published two novels, she married 1854 and died while she was pregnant 1855
the first novel she wrote was published after her death

Camelia says

4.5 *

Inghilterra, 1820. Un ecclesiastico irlandese, con la sua numerosa famiglia, giunge a Haworth, sperduto paesino nel Nord dello Yorkshire, per assumere l'incarico di vicario. La moglie, donna fragile e provata dalle continue gravidanze, morirà, a causa di un tumore, poco tempo dopo, lasciando il marito con sei orfanelli, un maschietto e cinque bimbe, di cui, la più piccola, non ha ancora due anni.

Haworth è un villaggio appartato, popolato da gente ostinata e diffidente, una realtà di campagna intrisa di antiche credenze e misteriose superstizioni; ed è in questo luogo, immerso nella brughiera selvaggia e distante dalla grande città, che tre di quelle bambine, educate da una zia metodista, e da un padre dal vivace intelletto, trascorreranno l'infanzia, vivranno la giovinezza e, anno dopo anno, vedranno fiorire, maturare e fruttare, un insolito e preziosissimo talento.

Quella che potrebbe apparire come l'introduzione ad un classico romanzo vittoriano, è in realtà la trama di una storia vera: la storia di una famiglia, di un grande genio, di un caso letterario unico nella storia e, soprattutto, di tre ragazze normalissime che, in punta di piedi, a dispetto della propria timidezza e dei

pregiudizi della società, si sono guadagnate, a pieno titolo, un posto d'onore nella storia della letteratura. Era il 1855 quando l'ormai quasi ottantenne Patrick Brontë, poco dopo la morte di Charlotte, ultima figlia superstite, si rivolse ad Elizabeth Gaskell chiedendole di scrivere una biografia tale da rendere giustizia alla memoria di quell'immenso talento sfiorito troppo presto. La Gaskell, amica personale della scrittrice scomparsa, e sua grande estimatrice, accettò con gioia l'incarico, prefiggendosi il compito di delineare, in modo rispettoso ed obiettivo, la figura di una donna tanto semplice quanto speciale.

Nonostante i buoni propositi, tuttavia, l'opera compiuta non è affatto immune dalla soggettività e dai sentimenti della sua autrice: nelle pagine, infatti, troviamo spesso riferimenti a vicende della Gaskell stessa, aneddoti, racconti, più o meno attendibili, della gente del posto e, non di rado, osservazioni del tutto personali (e anche un po' pedanti) della biografa. Eppure, paradossalmente, sono proprio la mancanza di obiettività e il forte coinvolgimento personale di Elizabeth Gaskell a rendere questa biografia un'opera unica e, senza dubbio, un documento imprescindibile per conoscere le figure di Charlotte Brontë e delle sue sorelle.

La biografia, impreziosita da suggestive e minuziose descrizioni dei luoghi, ripercorre, tutte le fasi della vita di Charlotte Brontë: l'infanzia nella canonica di Haworth; la difficile esperienza come istituttrice; l'incontro, fondamentale, con Constantin Héger; i primi tentativi in ambito letterario; la dolorosa perdita dei fratelli; la stagione del successo e della fama; e, finalmente, il periodo felice e sereno, ma ahimè troppo breve, del matrimonio.

Il lato più affascinante di quest'opera, ad ogni modo, è il suo sapersi soffermare sugli aspetti più semplici e personali della vita della scrittrice. Elizabeth Gaskell, infatti, nel presentarci la Brontë autrice, coglie l'occasione per raccontarci, innanzitutto, la Charlotte donna: la sua quotidianità, i suoi gusti, i suoi punti di vista, i timori e le speranze che l'accompagnarono fin da bambina. La Gaskell ci mostra le molte sfaccettature del carattere di una ragazza timidissima e caparbia al tempo stesso, di cui impariamo ad apprezzare il senso dell'umorismo, la determinazione e la forza d'animo, comprendendone, poco per volta, anche le fragilità, i timori e i momenti di scoramento. In poche parole, conosciamo, pian piano, il lato umano di Charlotte, il suo essere figlia, sorella, amica e, seppur per poco tempo, moglie.

Molto spesso si parla delle sorelle Brontë, e in particolar modo di Charlotte, ponendo l'accento sul suo presunto moralismo. Ciò, però, non rende affatto giustizia alla scrittrice; Charlotte, infatti, era tutto tranne che una moralista: aveva una concezione moderna della religione, era sempre aperta al confronto, e non esitava ad ironizzare sulla rigidità e sulla chiusura mentale degli ecclesiastici del suo tempo.

È facile, nella società odierna, additare un certo tipo di principi come espressione di moralismo; le convinzioni di Charlotte, invece, erano piuttosto espressione di un'autentica moralità, della profonda e sincera fede che, da sempre, fu la sua ancora di salvezza e il suo punto di riferimento, tanto nei periodi bui quanto nei momenti lieti.

Nel corso della narrazione, e quindi della vita della Brontë, sono molti i lutti e le sofferenze: la dissolutezza del fratello che spreca le sue doti e la sua stessa vita avviandosi ad una fine prematura; i continui problemi di salute che affliggevano l'intera famiglia; la frustrazione per i fallimenti in ambito lavorativo; la scomparsa in pochi mesi di Branwell, Emily ed Anne... Momenti di dolore che Charlotte, depressa e duramente provata, riuscirà ad affrontare e superare solo grazie alla sua incrollabile Fede.

L'immagine di Charlotte che vien fuori da questa biografia, è l'immagine di una donna dalla straordinaria sensibilità, attenta agli altri e profondamente legata alla propria famiglia; una donna che non aveva paura di difendere le proprie opinioni, timorosa all'idea di parlare in pubblico, ma nel contempo, abilissima nel mettere gli altri a proprio agio; una donna paziente ed altruista, eppure dotata di un carattere passionale (che sapeva dominare) e determinato: una che non si abbattè neppure quando Robert Southey, grande poeta del tempo, rispose ad una sua lettera consigliandole di rinunciare alla carriera letteraria e di dedicarsi, piuttosto, alle attività proprie di una donna, come la casa e la famiglia.

Anche quando si parla dei successi della Brontë scrittrice, ciò che colpisce di più è il fatto che Charlotte

fosse così poco affascinata della notorietà nel bel mondo, ma fosse invece particolarmente sensibile di fronte alle manifestazioni di apprezzamento da parte dei suoi cari; o si emozionasse nel ricevere lettere da parte di persone qualsiasi, spesso gente molto umile, che la ringraziavano per aver dato vita a storie e personaggi che avevano tenuto loro compagnia durante tante ore liete.

Tra le numerose storie infondate narrate su Charlotte Brontë, vi è l'idea che ella non amasse i bambini. Anche la Gaskell, nei primi capitoli della biografia, affermò questa convinzione, per poi smentirla molte pagine più avanti.

Il fatto è che, una volta cresciuta, Charlotte, non aveva mai avuto rapporti col mondo dell'infanzia, e i soli bambini che aveva conosciuto, erano quelli di cui si era occupata in veste di istitutrice: bimbi viziati, maleducati e prepotenti, di cui uno, un bambino di pochi anni, giunse perfino a lanciarle contro dei sassi. Quando però conobbe le figlie della Gaskell, e soprattutto la piccola Julia, spiegò, in una lettera molto tenera, il suo rapporto coi bambini, creature davanti alle quali provava sempre un certo imbarazzo: "Mi sembrano piccole meraviglie, il loro conversare, il loro modo di essere, sono per me occasioni di riflessione ammirata, perplessa".

Elizabeth Gaskell, desiderosa di fornire l'immagine più fedele (e più edificante) possibile dell'amica scomparsa, scelse, quando possibile, di presentare Charlotte attraverso le sue stesse parole, e si servì così di numerose sue lettere dalle quali, oltre al carattere della stessa Charlotte, è possibile apprendere molti particolari anche sulle sue sorelle.

Emily: l'indomita, ostinata, introversa Emily, decisa fino all'ultimo a svolgere le sue attività, ad occuparsi del prossimo, lei che con la sua risolutezza riusciva a placare anche il più feroce cane e che, per via di quel carattere indomabile, appariva scostante e fredda... Una figura, la sua, che ricorda da vicino quella di Lockwood quando, nel primo capitolo di *Cime Tempestose*, diceva di essere conosciuto come un duro di cuore per via del suo carattere, ma solo lui sapeva quanto tale fama fosse immeritata. È penoso leggere del dolore di Charlotte, raccontato da lei stessa, quando, in un freddo pomeriggio di dicembre, dopo aver portato ad Emily un rametto d'erica, si accorse che la sorella, ormai sfinita, non riconosceva più il fiore che le era stato tanto caro.

E come dimenticare l'ultima lettera scritta dalla povera Anne ad Ellen Nussey? La lettera in cui la ragazza, consapevole di avere poco da vivere, racconta dei suoi progetti ormai irrealizzabili e si rammarica di dover morire tanto presto, non solo per il padre e la sorella, ma anche per la consapevolezza di non aver realizzato niente di importante nella sua breve vita. Rimane impressa soprattutto la sua immagine nella pensione di Scarborough, con le finestre rivolte al mare, dove la mite ed altruista Anne, si fece accompagnare da Charlotte ed Ellen, per poi spegnersi, solo quattro giorni dopo il suo arrivo, così serena e rassegnata, preoccupata solo di rincuorare la sorella affranta.

La Gaskell, con la sua grande sensibilità e il suo evidente affetto per Charlotte, fa sì che anche il lettore divenga partecipe delle gioie e dei dolori della famiglia Brontë. Sono molti i momenti difficili da scordare, come quando Charlotte, dopo la morte delle sorelle, camminava nell'ombra della camera da pranzo ormai deserta, intorno a quello stesso tavolo sul quale, fino a poco tempo prima, aveva condiviso sogni e speranze con le sue sorelle mentre, tutte e tre, erano intente a scrivere quei capolavori che sarebbero entrati nella storia.

Sarebbe, tuttavia, un grosso errore ritenere che quella di Charlotte sia stata un'esistenza di solo dolore: ella conobbe infatti non pochi momenti di allegria in compagnia delle amiche, con le quali scherzava volentieri; il suo vivace senso dell'umorismo, la sua capacità di rallegrarsi delle piccole gioie quotidiane, e, non ultima, la lettera in cui rimpiange le risate con le sorelle, in grado di spazzare via i malumori, sono tutti elementi che suggeriscono come, anche in quella sperduta canonica, la gioia e la serenità, almeno in certi periodi siano stati ospiti usuali.

Spesso ci si lamenta del fatto che, in questa biografia, Charlotte Brontë, venga presentata come una sorta di

figura angelica, dedita al solo dovere ed indifferente ai piaceri materiali... Sinceramente non ho riscontrato niente di tutto ciò. È vero, vi sono lettere in cui Charlotte esprime il proprio rimorso per non riuscire a dedicarsi a Dio come vorrebbe, e per essersi concentrata troppo sul proprio piacere personale; ma dovremmo vedere le lettere per quello che sono: pensieri scritti in momenti particolari, a volte positivi, altri negativi, esse rappresentano determinati stati d'animo, non l'intera vita di una persona... In un frammento, Charlotte dice ad Ellen di sentirsi vecchia e brutta; successivamente, avendo appreso che l'amica si è seriamente preoccupata, la rimprovera scherzosamente di aver preso alla lettera le sue esternazioni scritte in un semplice attimo di pessimismo.

Tra le numerose critiche mosse alla Gaskell, ve ne sono alcune che la accusano di aver tralasciato alcuni significativi particolari della vita di Charlotte. I particolari a cui si allude sarebbero quelli relativi all'infatuazione di Charlotte per Constantin Héger, professore belga di letteratura, nonché marito della direttrice della scuola di Bruxelles in cui le Brontë studiarono. Naturalmente, in una società come la nostra, dove siamo abituati a vedere costantemente sviscerati i più intimi particolari della vita privata delle persone, può apparire strana una simile riserva da parte di una biografa. Non dimentichiamo però, che Elizabeth Gaskell non era una semplice biografa, ma era un'amica personale della scrittrice, una donna che l'aveva conosciuta e in cui Charlotte aveva riposto la propria fiducia; inoltre, e questo è essenziale, il presunto innamoramento di Charlotte per Héger, è una questione che, probabilmente, Charlotte non ammise completamente neppure con sé stessa e di cui, senza dubbio, non fece mai parola con nessuno. Che senso avrebbe avuto rendere pubblico un pettegolezzo così astratto ed irrilevante? E, soprattutto, con che coraggio Elizabeth Gaskell avrebbe potuto speculare su un sentimento tanto privato e gelosamente custodito nel cuore dell'amica scomparsa? Trovo che la scelta di non indagare sugli aspetti più delicati dell'animo di Charlotte, sia da considerarsi semplicemente come una forma di rispetto e d'intelligenza da parte della Gaskell. Fu questo stesso rispetto che impose alla biografa, dopo aver narrato dettagliatamente le vicende e i sentimenti della vita di Charlotte, di mantenere, per quanto possibile, il riserbo, sul breve periodo felice del matrimonio di Charlotte con Arthur Bell Nicholls, mostrandocene solo alcuni sprazzi, peraltro estremamente significativi.

“Da questo momento in poi, le sacre porte del focolare domestico si chiudono sulla sua vita matrimoniale” scrive Elizabeth Gaskell, ed è certamente un peccato che, dopo aver seguito Charlotte in ogni momento della sua vita, aver sofferto con lei ed esserci rallegrati dei suoi successi, non ci sia concesso di condividere le gioie del suo periodo più lieto; ma in fondo, proprio per rispetto a Charlotte, trovo che la scelta di Elizabeth sia stata quella più giusta.

Quel poco che ci viene mostrato, tuttavia, è più che sufficiente per comprendere la serenità, l'appagamento, la profonda felicità che, probabilmente, ella non aveva mai gustato veramente fino a quel momento.

Personalmente ho trovato molto commoventi gli ultimi momenti della storia di Charlotte: quando lei, in attesa di un bimbo e confortata dalle costanti ed amorevoli attenzioni del marito, continua a sopportare la malattia con pazienza, incapace di credere che quella felicità, tanto desiderata e finalmente raggiunta, possa esserle strappata via proprio in quel momento. Ma, come giustamente dice Elizabeth Gaskell: *“Gioivamo al pensiero che Dio avesse giudicato opportuno asciugare le sue lacrime (...) Ma le strade di dio non sono le nostre!”*.

Avevo desiderato a lungo leggere questa biografia, e devo dire che le aspettative non sono state affatto deluse.

Ho apprezzato moltissimo la figura di Charlotte, il suo carattere, la sua sensibilità, la sua profonda umanità, e per tutta la narrazione mi sono sentita davvero vicina a lei.

Ho molto apprezzato anche lo stile della Gaskell, sempre impeccabile ed elegante. L'unico aspetto che mi ha irritata è il tentativo della biografa di "scusare" la passionalità di Charlotte, di giustificare la sua conoscenza di sentimenti ed emozioni giudicate inappropriate per una donna, spiegando che il contesto in cui era vissuta

e gli eccessi del fratello Branwell, l'avevano portata, suo malgrado, a prendere coscienza di determinate realtà poco delicate. La Gaskell, per salvaguardare l'immagine dell'amica di fronte alla critica moralista dell'epoca vittoriana, insiste sul fatto che Charlotte, senz'altro, non era consapevole della presunta "indecenza" di alcuni passi dei suoi romanzi. Io trovo che, invece, Charlotte fosse pienamente convinta di quel che scriveva, solo che, a dispetto della mentalità di allora, ella non trovava proprio niente di scandaloso nel parlare apertamente della passione amorosa. Quando un letterato del tempo, maliziosamente, la accusò di aver scritto libri "un po'spinti", Charlotte rimase molto colpita e disorientata da tale affermazione: ella non accettava che le donne venissero relegate al ruolo di creature eteree, e rivendicava per il suo sesso, il diritto di pensare, sentire e scrivere proprio come gli uomini.

È facile per un lettore immedesimarsi nei romanzi e nei loro personaggi, ed è naturale gioire per una bella conclusione o rattristarsi per un finale amaro... Risulta più difficile confrontarsi con un racconto che, pur avendo tutte le caratteristiche del romanzo, è una storia dove le vicende, le emozioni e le sofferenze non sono frutto della fantasia di un bravo autore, ma sono realtà appartenute a persone autentiche.

Charlotte, coi suoi pregi e i suoi difetti, ha molto in comune con quelle eroine letterarie da lei stessa create, ne possiede le caratteristiche e i sentimenti e, se questa non fosse la sua vera storia, sarebbe facile immaginarla come la protagonista di un perfetto romanzo ottocentesco con tanto di insegnamento morale. Eppure non c'è niente di romanzesco nel racconto narrato dalla Gaskell: ci sono solo degli esseri umani, le loro vicende, i loro dolori e le loro speranze; a dimostrazione del fatto che, in fin dei conti, le storie più affascinanti sono proprio quelle tratte dalla vita reale e che, i veri eroi, non sono quelli che compiono imprese epiche nelle pagine di un romanzo, ma sono piuttosto le persone che, con coraggio, altruismo e dedizione, vivono le loro vite, affrontano le difficoltà e perseguono i loro obiettivi senza mai perdere di vista ciò che conta veramente... Proprio come una timida e talentuosa ragazza di campagna, nata quasi duecento anni fa nello Yorkshire, e mancata troppo presto.

Magrat Ajostiernos says

<https://cronicasdemagrat.com/2016/11/...>

Este libro me ha impresionado mucho más de lo que parecía posible

Carol ?? says

3.5*

I should never think about reviews! Once I decide I have Something To Say, it just drags on & on!

I now have recent reads that prove that writing a biography or memoir when the subject or close friends & family are still living is no easy task. Memories differ, things happen that some want to forget. Take by David Niven where he allegedly borrowed other peoples' memories, amalgamated some of his own & for obvious reasons didn't want to admit that his second marriage was deeply unhappy. & the biography of Reg Spiers proves in the internet age that changing names won't give you any privacy.

So I can understand some of the difficulties Mrs Elizabeth Gaskell would have faced when the recently

deceased Charlotte's father invited her to write the biography. Charlotte & Elizabeth were friends, but the friendship was relatively recent. It must have been a very delicate act balancing Rev Bronte's feelings & the truth. I guess to good Reverend didn't think there was anything very odd about his ideas on children's nutrition (the young Brontes lived mostly on potatoes, even though there was enough money for better food) because that is in the book! Even with EG's restrained writing Charlotte's father comes across as selfish & a bit of a nutter.

I think EG stands her ground on the subject of Branwell. As delicately as EG writes about him, there is no doubt that Branwell was a favoured & spoiled child. Except for one poem, I have never read any of his written works, but certainly his paintings can most charitably be described as uneven. On the other hand, just take a look of this painting of Charlotte's! Just full of joy.

I would like to read one of the CB biographies that show up in my GR recommendations. Or better still one about all three Bronte sisters. I think they will show a far more passionate & vital woman than comes across in EG's writing. The book comes to life when Charlotte's letters are used – CB is a most eloquent correspondent!

The edition I have is a 1971 by Heron Books. It's well illustrated & has extensive appendices, one of which mentions that EG was given access to some of the Brontes' juvenile writings, but gave them only the most cursory of studies. (in EG's defence they were tiny!)

I'm intending to reread Jane Eyre later in the year & will try another Bronte biography then.

Katherine says

Maybe I would have liked this more if I didn't know that Elizabeth Gaskell was a big fat phony who didn't even really care for Charlotte Bronte or her writing. "My dear friend Charlotte"? Really? She knew her for a couple years before she died, they were never "good friends" and Gaskell wrote letter upon letter spreading gossip about her and her family. Not to mention how often Gaskell brings herself into the narrative. Ugh.

Irene Lazlo says

Reseña completa en el blog: <https://loslibrosdeldesvan.blogspot.c...>

He visto que muchas personas le dan una puntuación baja a esta biografía porque Elisabeth Gaskell no es 100% fiel a la verdad en algunos asuntos, sobre todo los que pueden afectar a la moral pública. Pero yo creo que es una biografía increíblemente moderna y bien documentada para su época a pesar de eso y hay que tener en cuenta que muchas de las personas que aparecen en ella seguían vivas en el momento de escribir la Vida.

Además, aporta mucho más que los hechos vividos por Charlotte Brontë, también nos da una visión de la época y nos muestra la opinión de una autora sobre otra autora en época victoriana. Me ha parecido fascinante leer lo que la autora tiene que decir el tema del pseudónimo masculino de Charlotte Brontë, por ejemplo. Creo que esta biografía tiene mucho más que ofrecer y merece la pena aunque omita algunos hechos de la vida de Brontë. Para eso ya están las biografías modernas de la autora.

Melinda says

After I read that wretched book by Gelsely Kirkland, I was refreshed and encouraged to read a biography of Charlotte Bronte. I recently read "Cranford", and Elizabeth Gaskell became of interest to me. In searching other books that she had written, I found that she had known and been a friend of Charlotte Bronte's, and was asked by Charlotte's father to write a biography of her after her death. Hence the beginning of reading "The Life of Charlotte Bronte".

It is a very worthwhile book, based largely on the lovely letters written by Charlotte herself over the course of her lifetime to friends, publishers, and acquaintances. Oh what enjoyment to read letters that expressed such real and genuine depth of understanding about literature, art, character, and the place of Christians in a fallen world! (I am thinking here of the comparison of Charlotte's letters to so many blogs that are tepid, shallow, and so flabby in their language and intellectual structure! Whipped out in a "fast food" world of seconds and minutes contrasted with a "slow food" world where her letters took hours or days to write and evidenced long and deep thoughts, carefully considered and mulled over before being put on paper.)

I had always heard of the grim existence and life of the Bronte sisters. Mrs. Gaskell puts real faces to each of the Bronte children, and shows how the difficulties in their lives actually was used probably to mold them into the creative people they became. Six children were born into the home of Patrick Bronte, an Anglican priest and Maria, his wife. Tragically, the father outlived his wife and all six children. The first two daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, died within a month of each other when they were 12 and 11 years old respectively. They had contracted TB at the girls school they had attended for clergymen's daughters. Charlotte became the older sister caring for her younger sisters, her aging father and for her chronically ill brother. Branwell, the only son, died when he was 30, a broken and tragic young man. Seduced by the older wife of his employer, he suffered the loss of his job because of her, then was rejected by her and became an alcoholic and opium addict. Less than 3 months after Branwell died, younger sister Emily died from TB and grief at the age of 29. Less than a year later, youngest sister Anne also died, probably of TB, at the age of 27. Charlotte was left alone to take care of her aging father in his parish in Yorkshire.

While the environs in Haworth, Yorkshire were indeed severe and difficult, and the family situation filled with great trial and sorrow... I would not describe any of the Bronte's as grim. Charlotte was a deeply devoted Christian, who understood that much of our lot in life on earth involves suffering. Her father being an Anglican priest, she knew from her teaching in the church and from the Bible the truth of the fallen world we live in, and that truth enabled her to live with courage in very difficult circumstances. While she struggled with discouragement, poor health, and grief for long periods of time, she never despaired or projected any sentiment that would have reflected poorly on Christ who is her Lord. She loved her family, loved her father, and with her sisters banded together to write poetry and books suitable for publications. The perseverance of the three daughters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, to get their work published shows amazing tenacity and grit.

After reading "Jane Eyre", Charlotte's most famous book, I was struck by the vast education Charlotte had from the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, from the book of nature, and from books she read to educate herself. An interesting article to read alongside "Jane Eyre" is at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/b...> . The article is "Specific dates: the link between Jane Eyre, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Bible" and provides a fascinating link between the Bible Charlotte was so familiar with... the Book of Common Prayer used daily in their readings and prayers, and dates in the book of Jane Eyre. Fascinating reading!

She married when she was 39, and died a mere 9 months after her marriage, most likely of severe dehydration from terrible nausea and weakness from her pregnancy. She and the baby died and are buried in Haworth.

Duane says

A biography of Charlotte Bronte written by one of her contemporaries and as biographies go it's very good. If you are interested in or are a student of Charlotte Bronte this is a must read. It's probably more subjective than one would like a biography to be, but it's obvious Gaskell liked Charlotte and wanted to show her in the best possible light. But this is a very detailed work, full of interesting information about Charlotte and the entire Bronte family. And the fact that Gaskell is a very accomplished writer and novelist adds a style that you don't normally find in a biography.

Katie Lumsden says

A thoroughly brilliant, moving and engaging read - more letters and commentary than a biography at times, but well worth a read.

Rebecca says

I've heard this biography disparaged by others who love Charlotte Brontë, and so I fully intend to read other biographies for the sake of comparison. However, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this account of Ms. Brontë by one of her contemporaries.

ETA a few quotes (from Charlotte's letters) that really resonated with me:

"I have some qualities that make me very miserable, some feelings that you can have no participation in—that few, very few, people in the world can at all understand. I don't pride myself on these peculiarities. I strive to conceal and suppress them as much as I can; but they burst out sometimes, and then those who see the explosion despise me, and I hate myself for days afterwards."

"[T]hings that nobody else cares for, enter into my mind and rankle there like venom. I know these feelings are absurd, and therefore I try to hide them, but they only sting the deeper for concealment."

J.A. Ironside says

I like Elizabeth Gaskell's work. She tells engaging stories and that is exactly what she has done here. Originally requested by Charlotte's father to write a biography of Charlotte's life. Patrick Bronte together with Charlotte's widowed husband, Arthur Bell Nicholls, wisely realised that if they did not select someone to write about Charlotte's life, then someone who was not their choice would certainly do so. Unfortunately,

while Gaskell seemed the most suitable choice for a fair, unbiased account, they would have been better to have chosen one of Charlotte's many other female writer friends. Gaskell certainly does not allow the truth to get in the way of a good story. She certainly did do a fair amount of research, although she was happy to pass over various sources who had a better claim of intimacy with Charlotte than she herself did. Gaskell did visit Haworth during Charlotte's life and Charlotte visited Gaskell in London (where, it is to be noted, she was extremely uncomfortable and taken to gatherings where she would be considered an oddity with a curious lack of sensitivity in her host!) however the 'friendship' between them was not nearly so close as Gaskell intimates.

She also compounds the issue by giving an unequal and selective portrait of the rest of the Bronte family which does a great disservice to Patrick, Branwell and even Emily. Patrick wrote to Gaskell on several occasions to politely request that she clear up and amend certain inaccuracies; Gaskell never replied to any of these letters and went abroad just as the biography was published. In the end Patrick dropped the matter, preferring to let his daughter's memory rest.

Part of the problem with writing a biography of the Brontes, is that they wrote such strong and enduring characters that they frequently became confused with their creations. This biography gives a flavour of the times and certainly tells us a lot about Elizabeth Gaskell but get your Bronte facts elsewhere. Juliet Barker's *The Brontes* is excellent.

Marie says

Most of us now know how wrong Gaskell got some things. That being said, if she had not recorded the life of "her dear friend", the Brontës as we know them would not have been propelled to the mythical heights which have fueled their popularity. Gaskell does a good job of weaving Charlotte's life into a fantastical story, but left out major elements -- things that would have been improper or embarrassing to publish, and totally skewed and falsified other things to add to the romance and intrigue of the story. However, she above all wanted to do her friend justice and defend her from the vicious rumors that were circling around the London literary society. Her portrayal of Charlotte was a highly romanticized one that was constructed as an explanation for the "coarse" things that the Brontës wrote about. The biography is very apologetic as Gaskell was trying to explain why sisters were the way they were. Despite all of this, the story is a very good read, and does provide insight into the lives of the family in a very poetical way. Read this and then pick up Juliet Barker's definitive biography "The Brontës" which also explains, in great detail, the strengths and flaws of this, the first, of the Brontë biographies.

Kate says

I read this as a stand-in Gaskell while I was waiting for more of her fiction to arrive at the library. I can see why this biography is still considered one of Gaskell's important works.

First of all, Gaskell makes heavy use of letters to and from Bronte to illustrate Bronte's life and character. This is good biography practice, of course, but it also lets you see just how much more intellectual Bronte had become by the end of her life. Her letters become much more interested in ideas, and much more thoughtful as the book draws to its conclusion. The letters and conversations Gaskell chooses to include give the sense of a character developing through life, even if they are a bit rose-colored.

The book also did much to make me overcome my distaste for the Brontes. Their whole childhoods seem to be made up of Edward Gorey illustrations come to life - a mother who died soon after bearing the 6th of her children, a distant, though accomplished, father, a creepy manse for a home with an aunt for governess, little neighborhood society, two older sisters who die young, and the rapid deaths of Charlotte's remaining brother and two sisters just as their literary productions became recognized. Gaskell clearly loved Charlotte Bronte and thought she was brilliant, but maintains a Victorian insistence that Bronte was Finally Whole when she got married, even better when she got pregnant, despite the miserable illness and death that quickly ensued.

Gaskell-as-author is very present in the book, and since that is something I enjoy in biography & history, I loved her interpolations. The OUP edition I had was made from the 3rd edition that Gaskell put together, which eliminated some of the names and scenes mentioned in earlier editions because people had objected or Gaskell had been threatened with libel suits. As usual, Gaskell doesn't shy away from difficult topics - like Bronte's distress with Harriet Martineau's book to do with atheism, or the fact that Bronte didn't see how indelicate Jane Eyre could be, etc. This sounds all fussy - it isn't - it's a firm statement of Bronte's character in the face of what must have been quite a lot of criticism. Because the book is made up mostly of recounted conversations and letters, Bronte's voice shines nearly as clearly as Gaskell's.

I was surprised to like it so well. Good stuff.

Girl says

It's a fascinating book, especially if one wants to have a view of the Brontes as seen by their contemporaries. Gaskell did a lot of research on her subject, and many later biographers made use of her findings. However, she also omitted some key information about Charlotte Bronte's love life (her love for her married teacher, M. Constantine Heger), as it would not have gone down well with the public. It's a very interesting document of Victorian sensibilities.

Sonya says

I own a greeting card that depicts three happy, smiling young ladies who appear to be thinking slyly, all with brown eyes and middle-parted hair. The words "Bronte Sisters" are lettered into the pastel rose background of the card, and I have mounted it on the wall above this very computer where I pen--er, type--these lines to you. They smile down, but never make eye contact.

Yet I must report that, according to this biography of Charlotte by Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, my card and its merriness? Lies. For the Brontes in this book are ill-mooded, always coughing, often beleaguered with aching heads and low fevers and an incredible propensity to avoid personal contact with others unless absolutely necessary, and then only when they are so starved for company or wanting to bestow benevolence on villagers worse off than they are.

They live at the foot of an old musty graveyard where tainted rain runs down to their house and causes them all unending misery, from both health and psychological perspectives. Mrs. Gaskell paints Charlotte as so righteous and self-sacrificing that no doubt her friends might have rolled their eyes as she protested their praise, scolded them for suggesting she and her kin were novelists, and in general, was insistently morose, if not brilliant.

I am hesitant to give this books a judgment of stars. Gaskell is a wonderful writer, but she elides so many details of what might make these sisters more than saints, more than martyrs, more than scolds. So I will withhold my praise or dismay, and leave you with the declaration that I might be willing to give *Wuthering Heights* a second chance, knowing now that malnourished, stubbornly pious, and grieving sisters were at the wild story's root.

Susan says

It's amazing to be able to read a biography of Charlotte Bronte written by someone who knew her. Ms Gaskell used her skill developed as a novelist in presenting events, and in some places she was so strongly indignant on the Brontes' behalf--the Lowood school, Branwell's relationship with his employer's wife--that she had to make modifications in the third edition. (This version has all the third edition changes highlighted in the notes so the reader can compare for themselves) She made extensive use of Charlotte's letters, and there are interesting excerpts about writing and literature.

“You warn me to beware of melodrama, and you exhort me to adhere to the real. When I first began to write, so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate, that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides, and to follow in their very footprints. I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement; over-bright coloring, too, I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave and true.

My work (a tale in one volume) being completed, I offered it to a publisher. He said it was original, faithful to nature, but he did not feel warranted in accepting it; such a work would not sell. I tried six publishers in succession; they all told me it was deficient in “startling incident” and “thrilling excitement”...

Jane Eyre was rather objected to at first, on the same ground, but finally found acceptance.” Charlotte Bronte letter to W. H. Lewes, Nov 6 1847

Ms Gaskell did not have all the information that has since turned up (the Bronte children's Gondal and Agrian writings, Charlotte Bronte's "crush" on her Brussels tutor M. Heger) and she respected the sensibilities of Charlotte's father and husband (including little info on her other marriage proposals, for ex.) so a modern biography would have better information in those areas.

Dorothea says

This is not *the one* book to read about the Brontës, but certainly not to be skipped if one is reading several.

It was completed and published only two years after Charlotte's death, by a personal friend of Charlotte's who was also a friend of her father's and who gained access to many of Charlotte's letters and who traveled to all the places that were important to Charlotte and interviewed people there who knew her.

So, despite the omissions, the softenings, the biases that Mrs. Gaskell wrote along with the truth, her *Life of*

Charlotte Brontë is important, nearly as a primary source. In it are not only long excerpts from many letters (which can, of course, be found elsewhere) but also Mrs. Gaskell's own reports of conversations with Charlotte and clear descriptions of Haworth, the Rue d'Isabelle in Brussels, and other places that were so important to Charlotte's life and writing.

The *Life* is also very beautifully written. I'm now eager to read Mrs. Gaskell's novels, but I think one pleasure to be expected from them -- her ability to describe a landscape -- is probably greatest in this biography, since the landscapes are real. As I'm not a Victorian reader with boundless patience, I often skip over descriptions of scenery, and I almost did so at the beginning of the *Life*. That would have been a mistake! This chapter, which carries the reader from the Leeds and Bradford railway, to Keighley station, to the steep hill of Haworth village, leads the reader into the Haworth church, to stand before certain inscriptions to the right of the communion table.

Anyone familiar with the story of the Brontë family will of course know what these are: the grave-markers of a family marked by death. Mrs. Gaskell gives their texts in full. A more powerful, somber, and appropriate beginning to Charlotte Brontë's biography, I can't imagine.

I read the Penguin Classics edition, edited and introduced by Alan Shelston in 1975. He explains that the text given is that of the first edition. The biography was substantially revised for a third edition: some new material was added at that time but two major episodes (that of the Cowan's Bridge school for clergymen's daughters, upon which Charlotte Brontë based Lowood in *Jane Eyre*, and that of Mrs. Robinson's role in Branwell Brontë's downfall) were revised to be less scandalous. Notes and an appendix give the important additions and changes of the third edition.

Shelston's introduction is a bit more severe on Mrs. Gaskell than I thought justified (although I'm easily swayed by good writers) but I was glad of his argument that she was compelled to write this biography because she perceived Charlotte Brontë as a real-life version of one of her own heroines -- a moral paragon. This was a good thing to keep in mind while reading the *Life*; it explains not only the major omission of Charlotte's feelings for M. Heger (an omission which can also be explained by readers' sensibilities and the need for approval by Charlotte's still-living father and widower) but also some minor smoothed edges.

Lorena says

I read this book because Truman Capote recommended it in one of his letters, and so far he's batting 100. It explains so much about this very serious, judgmental, somewhat dour woman and the darkness in her work. My God, she lived across the lane from an overpacked cemetery whose rotting bodies leaked into the town water supply and caused much sickness and death, including many members of her family. I was fascinated to read that she admired the French writer George Sand, who was her temperamental and philosophical opposite, and yet, under the skin, a kindred spirit. On several occasions in the book Gaskell mentions that Charlotte was not fond of Jane Austen for her preciousness, lack of depth, and sheltered life. So interesting! I myself have never been able to get more than 100 pages into Jane Austen without falling into a deep sleep.

Charlotte Bronte was a fascinating woman, who lived in a dark country. She lived without hope. Death was more familiar to her than life. And we are so lucky she wrote it all down.

Sara says

What a remarkable discourse this is on the life of Charlotte Bronte, as assembled by her friend, Elizabeth Gaskell. Having been written so soon after her death, this biography might perhaps lack in the objectivity which a later biography could present, but whatever might be lacking in that quarter is well made up for in spirit and understanding.

Much of Gaskell's approach is to quote from the considerable correspondence of Charlotte herself, which gives this a pointedly personal flavor. We are seeing Charlotte's life as she herself saw it, and while that cannot be all of the truth of a life, it can surely be most of what is significant.

I was struck by how much of what makes *Jane Eyre* so gripping is torn from actual experience. That Charlotte was subjected to many of the events at school that parallel those at *Eyre's* beginning is horrible to think and the death of her own sister, Maria, is the event that precipitates her character of Helen. With such a somber beginning to life, she had every right to expect more happiness and comfort in later years, but little of that was forthcoming.

Her determination in completing her novels in the face of some real criticism, is a testament to the strong character she possessed and her belief in God's presence in her life. She accepted herself as a faulted human being and she was welcoming of constructive criticisms that she felt might increase her understanding of her own foibles.

Speaking about stories she read when quite young, she says "...for I read them in childhood, and childhood has a very strong faculty of admiration, but a very weak one of criticism." I found that a poignant observation, for I too have a great love for some literature that came to me young and still impresses my soul although I would be forced to confess that they are inferior to other works which touch me less.

Of course, among the more touching parts of the biography are the deaths of her sisters, Emily and Anne. Our familiarity with them as authors no doubt increases our distress at their deaths, but I was struck at how perfectly her view of death aligns with what we ourselves feel upon the loss of those we love. Speaking of another young acquaintance, Charlotte says, "Wherever I seek for her now in this world, she cannot be found, no more than a flower or a leaf which withered twenty years ago. A bereavement of this kind gives one a glimpse of the feeling those must have who have seen all drop around them, friend after friend, and are left to end their pilgrimage alone. But tears are fruitless, and I try not to repine." How hauntingly predictive of her own situation to come, but even in the face of her serious personal losses, she held to the last part of this statement and refrained from sinking into her sorrows.

I could quote at length from the letters she wrote regarding this loss. Having lost a close sister myself, I could feel the impact of all her words and feelings. Of Emily, "not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her." She was as expressive in her letters, as ever she was in her novels. I was delighted to read her own expressed opinion of Jane Austen, a curiosity that I never thought to have satisfied.

There is not a moment of boredom in this book and Mrs. Gaskell exhibits her own great talent of writing and exposition. I am ashamed at not having read all of Charlotte Bronte's writings and am quite anxious in the light of this better understanding of her character to now rectify the omission. I will happily undertake both *Shirley* and *Villette* before the year's end. I am also stirred to re-read *Jane Eyre* and the works of both Emily and Anne.

