Biography is a genre and a field unto itself, the purview of journalists, amateurs, “professional biographers,” and academic historians. The nature of this mixed bag leads to a rather mixed reputation, which is itself distinctive. Most biography is linear and narrative, marching from a single person’s birth to death, although there have been attempts to shake that up, resulting in family and group biographies and some attempts to breach chronological narration.

Not all biographies attempt to re-capture an entire life; some focus on an individual’s role in a single event or one aspect or period of a subject’s life. Multi-volume biographies are not represented in this list. Intellectual and literary biographies are one sub-field. There is no end of biographies of politicians, especially the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln. Biographies of military figures are under-represented in this list; biographies of white people are over-represented.