Ethics in Biography and Memoir
(BAM 70400-01)(40980)
Fall 2022

Professor Ava Chin
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Tuesday, 2pm-4pm EST
Hybrid: in person and via Zoom

Course Description
This course explores the range of ethical issues that pertain to memoir, biography, and general nonfiction, and investigates how writers and authors approach them. Utilizing a variety of nonfiction texts, including some by journalists and graphic novelists, we will discuss: truth, falsehood, and representation; attempts at objectivity, and clarifying subjectivity; the pressures involved with writing about family, living subjects, and members of marginalized communities. Students will be exposed to other ethics-related issues, such as libel, defamation of character, confidentiality, and consent.

We will explore these works through a prism of ethical questioning, in order for students to consider these when approaching their own work, including: Who is this Narrator—first-person, omniscient, or otherwise—and why should the reader trust them? Has the writer spent enough time cultivating, clarifying, and establishing their Narrator and their motivations—and addressing any relevant conflicts of interest—so that readers of the work clearly understand from where they are coming?

You are required to read about a book a week, and some secondary readings. In addition to a paper at the end of the semester, each student will lead a session on one of the required texts, and will be expected to bring in at least one ethics-related question a week, pertaining to the reading.

Learning Goals
1. Enrich your study & practice of memoir and biographical writing by seeing them through a variety of ethical lenses
2. Present and discuss well-reasoned arguments around ethical points
3. Expand your understanding and scope of the genres of memoir and biography
4. Deepen your understanding of the ethical issues you are likely to face in your current and future writing projects

Graded Assignments
1. Presentation and class participation: 30%
2. Paper, 15 pages: 70%
   This paper will address some aspect of the ethics readings and perspectives we have learned about in class that applies most urgently to a project you are pursuing for your thesis (please select a topic that is relevant to your work). Students are required to check in with me about their topics.
Please consider the following:

- What ethical questions exist among and towards my subjects and subject matter?
- What ethical position am I taking in relation to them, and what ethical problems are arising for me? What are my own motives here?
- How do these issues relate to the subjects we’ve covered in class?

**Recommended reading for the summer:** Vivian Gornick’s *Fierce Attachments*

**Required Texts (In Progress)**

Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*
Joseph Mitchell, “Professor Seagull” and *Joe Gould’s Secret* (from *Up in the Old Hotel*)
Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*
Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior* + excerpt from *China Men*
Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*
Roxane Gay, *Hunger*
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*
Hida Viloria, *Born Both*
Janet Malcolm, “41 False Starts” [handout]