Syllabus for
Biography and International History

This is a synchronous, online class at the Graduate Center-CUNY
Class will use both Blackboard and Zoom

Th 6:30-8:30pm
Fall 2020

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Office Hours TBA
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Biography is a popular form of historical writing, often appreciated for its narrative form and accessibility. Generally, biography follows the life of a particular individual (or of ideas, disease, or material objects) and sees the world unfold from the point of view (or in relation to) their chosen subject of study.

This course explores the global history the twentieth century through a series of such narratives. Each book we read will offer a unique perspective and set of insights onto overlapping events, focusing especially on, but not limited to, the stories of pioneering women who made contributions of international consequence.

How do we remember major events of the twentieth century? Who gets credited for their action and who does not? Who gets left out entirely? Why? And how do our understandings of the past change as we look at it through new eyes?

This is a discussion-oriented seminar in which the primary objective is for students to analyze critically and evaluate information in order to provide new and insightful interpretations and commentary of their own.

Each week, students will be required to submit a one-page critical response paper to the reading due. The papers should be one page in length, no more no less. All papers will be submitted through Blackboard’s TurnItIn feature.

Students will also serve as Discussant for two books during the term. As Discussant, they will summarize their chosen reading at the outset of class, provide a quick review of the book’s strengths and weaknesses, and ask 3 discussion questions. The discussion questions should be posted on Blackboard by 5pm on the Wednesday before the class in question.

Students will also have to write a biographical research-based paper of 20-25 pages in length on a topic of their choice, though the project must be approved by the instructor; a 20-minute presentation of this work (which will include questions and discussion from the class) will also be required. All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, and in 12-point Times or Times New Roman font.
**Course Learning Outcomes:** By the end of the course, students should have an intermediate understanding of the international history of the 20thc as seen through the lens of particular biographical narratives. Students should be able to discern how narrative masks as well as reveals elements of story, through choice and perspective. Students should be able to analyze primary and secondary sources, synthesize as necessary, and discuss historical significance. Students should demonstrate the ability to construct solid arguments, both through debate and through written work. Students should demonstrate reading comprehension and strong writing skills as well.

**Grading Policy:** There is no grading curve in this class. The assignments will be evaluated using a plus/minus letter grade system, where a B- is an 82, a B is an 85, and a B+ is an 88. The distribution is as follows:
- Class Participation 20%
- Weekly papers 20%
- Presentation of Research 20%
- Final Research Paper 40%

Rubric for grades on written assignments:
- **F:** Papers that are poorly written, contain grammatical errors, and have little to no research.
- **D:** Papers that are poorly organized, have an unclear thesis, are poorly written, contain grammatical errors, and/or have moderate to no research.
- **C:** Papers must have fair organization, must be fairly well written, and must contain substantive research. Thesis must be clear. There should no more than a few to moderate number of grammatical errors.
- **B:** A well-done paper. Should be well written, well organized, convincing, well researched, and should contain few to no grammatical errors. Papers that receive a B perhaps could use additional evidence or might need to think through certain arguments a bit more or might need to think about aspects of their topic from other angles.
- **A:** An excellent to outstanding paper. Given to a paper that meets all requirements and expectations for the assignment. Presents a convincing argument, uses a wide array of sources (as appropriate), is well written, and contains no major grammatical errors.

**Schedule:**

**AUG 27**
- Introduction. Meet the class. Discussion of writing/biography
- Please be prepared to discuss:
  - [https://contingentmagazine.org/2020/05/21/how-do-you-write-a-biography/](https://contingentmagazine.org/2020/05/21/how-do-you-write-a-biography/)

**SEP 3**
- Marie Curie, Susan Quinn

**SEP 10**
- The Woman Who Smashed Codes, Jason Fagone

**SEP 17**
- The Last Empress, Hanna Pakula

**SEP 24**
- Eleanor Roosevelt Vol III, Blanche Wiesen Cook
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>OCT 1</td>
<td>The Price of Peace</td>
<td>Zach Carter</td>
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<td>OCT 8</td>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Hayden Herrera</td>
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<td><strong>SPECIAL GUEST: BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR KIRAN DESAI WILL VISIT CLASS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>OCT 15</td>
<td>The Secret History of Wonder Woman</td>
<td>Jill Lepore</td>
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<td>OCT 22</td>
<td>Evita</td>
<td>Marysa Navarro</td>
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<td>OCT 29</td>
<td>Indira</td>
<td>Katherine Frank</td>
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<td>NOV 5</td>
<td>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</td>
<td>Rebecca Skloot</td>
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<td>NOV 12</td>
<td>STUDENT PRESENTATIONS BEGIN</td>
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<td>NOV 19</td>
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<td>NOV 26</td>
<td>THANKSGIVING (NO CLASS)</td>
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