DESCRIPTION
In this course, we will examine formal experiments in life writing—with a focus on texts that combine biography and memoir—as models for our own writing. Any life story is also the story of others. Our readings will emphasize forms of narration that grapple with relations between self and others, with intimacy and distance, with personal experience and cultural history. We'll listen to podcasts that tell life stories, examining narrative techniques in relation to audio craft. In the process, we'll examine interwoven questions about the ethics of life writing; truth, fiction, and subjectivity; memory and imagination; historical context and character development; style and point of view.

To complement the longer readings, we'll read short craft essays and theoretical articles. Students will experiment with writing about a subject of their choice in a variety of forms, including a Wikipedia entry or website, a preface, a footnote, an obituary, a series of social media posts, and a biographical or autobiographical essay. Drawing on course texts, we'll conduct workshops on elements of craft on a regular basis—leading up to intensive workshops to help you develop the essay that will be your semester project.

Books to Purchase
Hanif Abdurraqib, Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest (University of Texas Press)
Eve Babitz, Eve’s Hollywood (NYRB Classics)
Bridgett Davis, The World According to Fannie Davis (Back Bay Books)
Vivian Gornick, The Situation and the Story (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)
Lulu Miller, Why Fish Don’t Exist: A Story of Loss, Love, and the Hidden Order of Life (Simon & Schuster)
Nancy K. Miller, My Brilliant Friends (Columbia University Press)
GB Tran, Vietname: A Family’s Journey (Villard)

If you'd like to purchase books through the GC online store (often at a discount), you can do that here.

ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Responses
Each week, half the class will post informal reading responses to the main page of this site by Monday. The other half will post comments on at least two of the posts before class Wednesday. These conversations will give you a sense of what’s on each other’s minds—and no doubt spill over into class discussion. You have a lot of flexibility with the responses. The following questions are designed to stimulate your thinking, but don’t feel beholden to address them if you’ve got other ideas:

• What formal elements in the writing may be instructive for your own writing?
What specific techniques does the writer use to blend memoir and biography?
Does the writer have a tendency to use particular rhetorical techniques or patterns of language?
What is the relationship between narrator, subject, and audience?
How does the structure work? What’s the larger structure? Does the writer use distinctive “local” techniques to create structure within structure. How long are chapters? When do we learn important information? Why there? What’s left out? What difference does this make?
What research did the writer conduct? How does the writer’s approach to integrating research shape your reading experience?
Does the writer follow what scholar Paul John Eakin calls “the rules of the game” when it comes to autobiography? Does the writer break them? Or play with them in interesting ways? Or transform them?

Aim for 2-4 paragraphs. And I really mean it when I say these reading responses are informal. The idea is to spark all our thinking.

Obituary, Preface, or Wikipedia Entry
Write an obituary, preface, or Wikipedia entry about your choice of figure. As you compose, consider the relation between common conventions of the genre, your chosen person, and yourself as a writer. Are the conventions and person a good fit? Might the conventions need to be stretched or tailored to the person? What can you, as a writer, bring to make the piece distinctive? Aim for 500-750 words.

Footnote
Imagine another writer has written a book that features your chosen person in a minor role. This writer loves footnotes, long ones. Imagine the tone, style, and form of the work. Give it a name and a hypothetical author. Then write a footnote about your chosen person for that imaginary book. Your footnote may be scholarly, as in many biographies; it may be snide, as in some other biographies (!); it may be playful, as in the fiction of Siri Hustvedt or David Foster Wallace. Aim for 200 words.

Social Media Posts
Choose a social media platform and create a series of five posts representing your chosen person. You might create first-person posts in the guise of the person or third-person ones in a voice you develop. Consider the aims of the account. Are the posts publicity? Do they seek to create awareness about an underknown figure? Do they memorialize the person? Are they fan-driven? Do they seek to create community?

Memoir, Biographical, or Hybrid Essay (or Podcast)
Write autobiographical, biographical, or hybrid essay that features your chosen person (though that person may or may not be the central figure). You’ll consult with me and your classmates as you develop the essay. The form, style, and tone will be different for everybody, but you should consider them carefully—especially as they represent relations between you and your subject. You might approach the projects as a stand-alone essay or a book chapter. Aim for 3000 – 4000 words. You have the alternate option to create a podcast rather than an essay. If you do this, consult with me and we’ll work out the parameters.

CALENDAR
August 31
Wikipedia Entries: Merry Clayton; Dory Previn; Eve Babitz
Obituaries: Christopher Isherwood; Ralph Neves; Judee Sill

September 7
Eve Babitz, Eve's Hollywood
Reading responses: Daniel, Avril, Sarah, Julian, Sandy, Annabelle

September 14
Carolyn Heilbrun, "Introduction," Writing a Woman's Life
Model Footnotes: TBD
Reading responses: Myka, Lucy, Karen, Abby, Brittany, Ian, Chu-Ping
Workshop: Footnotes

Monday, September 19
Footnotes due: Post to our site; post a comment on at least two students' footnotes before class Wednesday

September 21
Bridgett Davis, The World According to Fannie Davis
Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory”
Reading responses: Daniel, Avril, Sarah, Julian, Sandy, Annabelle
Guest: Bridgett Davis

September 28 (online)
One Year: 1977, “Jesus on a Tortilla”
Hidden Brain, “The Story of Your Life” & “You Can’t Hit Unsend”
Vivian Gornick, "The Situation and the Story"
Workshop: "The Situation and the Story"
Reading responses: Myka, Lucy, Karen, Abby, Brittany, Ian, Chu-Ping

October 5
No class

October 12
Philip Gourevitch & Nicholas Christopher, “The Ethics of Memoir Writing”
Maia, “Whose Story?: The Ethics of Writing Memoir”
Edmund White, “Collateral Damage: How I Lost a Friend and Ex-Lover by Writing about Him”
Mary Karr, “The Liars Club: How I Told My Friends I Was Writing about Them and What They Said in Return”
Jason Tongay, “Memory and Memoir”
Workshop: Obituary, Wikipedia Page, or Preface
Reading responses: Daniel, Avril, Sarah, Julian, Sandy, Annabelle
Monday, October 17
Obituaries, Wikipedia pages, or Prefaces due; comment on at least two students' posts before class

Wednesday

October 19
Hanif Abdurraqib, *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to a Tribe Called Quest*
Hanif Abdurraqib, *Lost Notes: 1980, "Grace Jones"*
Workshop: Structure and repetition
Reading responses: Myka, Lucy, Karen, Abby, Brittany, Ian, Chu-Ping

October 26
*Anything for Selena, Episode 1, “Selena and Me” & Episode 2: "Selena and Abraham"
Workshop: Social Media Posts
Reading responses: Daniel, Avril, Sarah, Julian, Sandy, Annabelle

November 2
GB Tran, *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey*
Workshop: Playing with chronology
Reading responses: Myka, Lucy, Karen, Abby, Brittany, Ian, Chu-Ping

Monday, November 7
Social Media Posts due; comment on at least two students' posts before class

Wednesday

November 9
*S-Town, Chapters 1 & 2*
Reading responses: Daniel, Avril, Sarah, Julian, Sandy, Annabelle

November 16
*Nancy K. Miller, My Brilliant Friends*
Reading responses: Myka, Lucy, Karen, Abby, Brittany, Ian, Chu-Ping
Guest: Nancy K. Miller

November 23 (online)
Lulu Miller, *Why Fish Don’t Exist: A Story of Loss, Love, and the Hidden Order of Life*
Workshop: Voice and Sources
No Reading responses

November 30
Vivian Gornick, "The Essay"
Essay Workshop

December 7
Essay workshop

December 18
Essays due, via email