Fall Semester 2019, Tuesdays, 6:30-8:30
The Biographical Narrative: Forms of Life Writing, BM 70100
The Graduate Center, room 6421
365 5th Ave.

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Office: Room 6105. Office hours by appointment

Course Description:

"To live over people's lives," wrote Henry James, "is nothing unless we live over their perceptions, live over the growth, the change, the varying intensity of the same-- since it was by these things they themselves lived." This course will interrogate various forms of so-called "life writing" (biography/fictional biography/memoir) to investigate the meaning, aims, ethics, pitfalls, and possibilities of the genre as practiced in literature. We will therefore examine a wide range of topics that various forms of life-writing encounter: the relation between fact and fiction; the significance of politics and historical context; the impact of individual psychology; point of view in narration; the function of imagination; the use or exploitation of marginal figures. And to the extent that life-writing depends on the creation of character, this course looks closely at how such characters are created from real people: how a living, breathing person seems to arise out of a mass of sometimes contradictory "facts"; how characters are made to change, that is, if they do; how characters can make a story move; and of course how or if traditional forms of life-writing might be liberated from its brick-like borders.

Requirements:

Each student will prepare a 20-30 minute oral presentation for delivery during the semester based on our reading, and the student shall then lead a discussion on the presentation. Each class, all students will prepare discussion questions that may or may not be collected.

Please be aware of special lectures/discussions (noted in the syllabus) sponsored by the Leon Levy Center for Biography, particularly on Wednesday, September 25th, for the Annual Lecture.

On Tuesday November 5th, each student will submit a working bibliography for their projects.

On Tuesday November 5th, each student will also submit a 3-page (750 words) "review" of one of the books we've read-- but not on one of the books they've chosen for their oral presentation.

Each student must have chosen, very early in the term, a biographical subject to research. (Toward the end of the term, we will devote one session to research questions that the students may have encountered on the way.) On the last day of classes, students will provide an oral summation of their projects; final papers due at that time (circa 15-20 pages in length, double-spaced).

Projects are to be an introduction to their biographical subject or a narrative from a section of that subject's life.

Naturally, of course, attendance is mandatory-- and class participation essential. Both will be factored into your final grade, which will depend, more or less, on your review (15%),
your oral presentation (25%), your class participation (20%), your final paper (40 %). Late papers, absences will also factor into your grade, negatively alas.

**Tentative Schedule of Readings:**

**Tuesday, August 27:** Introduction to Biography.

**Tuesday, Sept. 3:** The Art and Craft of Biography (excerpts will be sent, unless otherwise noted): Richard Holmes, *Footsteps* (excerpt); Lytton Strachey, "Preface" to *Eminent Victorians* (easily available); Leon Edel, "The Figure in the Carpet," Catherine Drinker Bowen, "The Writing of Biography," Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography," Justin Kaplan, "The Culture of Biography."

**Tuesday, Sept. 10:** Biography and History: "Great" Men & Women; Edmund Morris (introduction to *Theodore Roosevelt*); Lytton Strachey, "Florence Nightingale," from *Eminent Victorians*. Oral presentations begin.

**Tuesday, Sept. 17:** History and Point of View: Janet Flanner, "Fuehrer"; Robert A. Caro, excerpt on Richard Russell.

**Tuesday, September 24:** Biography and Historical Sources: Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

**Wednesday, September 25:** David Nasaw, Lecture, "My Three Moguls," Proshansky, 6:30 pm. Note that because there are then no classes, this lecture is mandatory.

**Tuesday, Oct. 1:** NO GC CLASSES

**Tuesday, Oct. 8:** NO GC CLASSES

**Tuesday, Oct. 15:** Biography and Uncertain Portraiture: Emmanuel Carrere, *The Adversary*


**Tuesday, Oct. 29:** Found Imagination: Julia Blackburn, *Daisy Bates in the Desert: A Woman's Life Among the Aborigines*

**Tuesday, Nov. 5:** Research methods session. Roundtable discussion of projects. Bibliographies due. Reviews due.

**Tuesday, Nov. 12:** Biographical Fragments: Elizabeth Hardwick. *Sleepless Nights*; excerpts from Carolyn Heilbrun, "Writing a Woman's Life."

**Tuesday, Nov. 19:** Biography and Ethics, cont.: Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*.

**Tuesday, Nov. 26:** Biographical Avoidance: Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*.

**Tuesday, Dec. 3:** Biographical Unbecoming: Adam Phillips, *On Becoming Freud*.

**Tuesday, Dec. 10:** Last class-- Concluding business, final questions. Paper presentations; and papers due.