Life Writing

Fall 2024 / English CLLW

Class: Tuesdays 12-2:45 / Room: TK

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*Description*

How does one tell -- vividly, interestingly -- the story of a life? How do we access a private life, or situate it in a public world? What if the subject is dead, or is famous, or is a dog, or is oneself? How do we manage the reporting, writing, and revising process? How do we know where to begin? This course will examine the art of writing narrative nonfiction about individual lives.

In this class, we will explore different genres of life writing. We will discuss how to approach research, consider questions of perspective, and examine different narrative structures. We will talk about how to begin a piece, how to end it, what to do along the way. We will strive for clarity but be sensitive to nuance. We will consider ethical obligations and standards. We will pay special attention to language, style, and voice.

And of course, we will write.

*Writing*

You will do exercises in class to explore, strengthen, and practice certain aspects of good writing. Outside of class, you will write two papers. Life writing can take many forms, and so can your work. You can write a more traditional magazine-style profile of a person who interests you – a project that would involve interviewing your subject and people who know them well, in addition to the kind of reporting that would help place your subject in context. You can take a more essayistic approach, giving us a likeness of your subject and communicating something important about their personality and worldview. You can write a biographical sketch of a historical or public figure (alive or dead), using secondary sources and archival materials. You can draw from your own life, making connections between your experience and larger social (or, for that matter, natural) forces.

Each paper will be between 2,000-3,000 words (though this is flexible: the length should make sense for the subject and structure). Please note that while both papers can be personal in some sense, only one can be a memoir. (This is also not a hard rule. If you have a good reason for wanting to write two personal essays, let me know and we’ll discuss.) When you submit your drafts, please include a short paragraph on a separate page outlining any context, concerns, or other information that would be helpful for the reader to know. If, for instance, the essay is part of a larger project, let us know. Or if you’re struggling with the opening section and want to make sure that the workshop discusses it, let us know. And so on.

Before the second week of class, you will submit two pitches for your first paper. You will also sign up, via a google doc, for a deadline to submit that paper to the class. Please note that all draft deadlines will be on a Sunday at 6 pm. We will workshop your essay the following week (i.e., nine days after your deadline). Halfway through the semester, we’ll repeat this process for your second paper.

You will then choose one of your two drafts to revise. The revision is due two weeks after your second workshop.

*Reading*

Becoming a better writer usually requires becoming a better reader. I will not assign a lot of reading, but I will expect you to do it – and to do it carefully. The first part of each class will be devoted to discussing assigned reading. Because this is a writing seminar, our focus will be on form more than content. When you read, keep a number of basic questions in mind – and take notes.

* Why is the lede (or the start of the piece) effective or ineffective? Why is the kicker (or the end) effective or ineffective?
* What is one sentence or phrase that stands out to you? Be ready to explain why.
* What is the mood of the piece?
* Is there anything unusual or interesting about the structure? What is the author up to?
* Take note of anything else that interests you – transitions, dialogue, physical descriptions, any particularly arresting scenes, and so on.
* If two readings have been assigned that day, it may be helpful to note a few ways they connect to and break from each other.

Along with published reading, we will, of course, be reading each other’s work. Please write a short (1-2 paragraph) response to share with the author and email it them – and to me – by the Wednesday night after their workshop. You may also want to share a line edit or annotation of their work.

*Class Policies*

Attendance is part of your grade. If, for some good reason, you cannot attend in person, email me at least 15 minutes before the start of class (and preferably as far ahead of time as possible), and I will send you a zoom link. Please do not come to class if you are sick. If you’re well enough to attend remotely, I’ll send you a zoom link.

Please put your phone away during class.

Office hours are Tuesday 10-12. Please make an appointment on my calendly. (If you have another class during that time or another good reason you cannot attend office hours, I will make other time slots available.)

If you need to miss class, reschedule a meeting, or ask for an extension, please let me know ahead of time.

*Grading*

You will not receive individual grades for any assignments or papers. Your overall grade will reflect your cumulative work, your commitment to the course, and your progress.

Your work must conform to the FAS Honor Code.

Do not use any kind of generative AI in your work, even as a prompt.

Another note: Workshops can be difficult. Writing and sharing writing can make a person feel vulnerable. In this class, we will treat each other with respect. That does not mean mindless praise or avoiding criticism; constructive criticism is its own kind of respect. Be honest but mindful. On the other side of it, remember that editorial feedback is not meant to be personal.

*Schedule*

September 3: Introductions and overview

September 10: Profiles

Reading: “41 False Starts,” by Janet Malcolm

Student drafts

Writing due: two pitches

September 17: Profiles cont.

Reading: “The Islander,” by Hilton Als

“Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” by Gay Talese

“Below Deck,” by Lizzie Presser

Student drafts

September 24: Profiles cont.

Reading: “The Philosopher of Feelings,” by Rachel Aviv

“Show Dog,” by Susan Orlean

Student drafts

October 1: Profiles cont.

Reading: “No Joke,” by Louisa Thomas

“Comebacker,” by Louisa Thomas

Student drafts

October 8: Personal essays

Reading: “My Mustache, My Self,” by Wesley Morris

“The Pain is Always the High, and the High is Always the Pain,” by Jay Caspian Kang

Student drafts

Writing due: two pitches for second paper

October 15: Personal essays cont.

Reading: excerpt of “Stay True,” by Hua Hsu

Student drafts

October 22: Personal essays cont.

Reading: excerpt from “Educated,” by Tara Westover

Student drafts

October 29: Personal essays cont.

Reading: “Such Perfection,” by Chloe Cooper Jones

November 5: Biography

Reading: excerpts from “Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life,” “Virginia Woolf,” and “Tom Stoppard: A Life,” by Hermione Lee

Student Drafts

November 12: Biography Cont.

Reading: “The Secrets of Lyndon Johnson’s Archive,” by Robert Caro

Excerpt from “The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power,” by Robert Caro

Student drafts

November 19: Profile Cont.

Reading: “Dr. Don,” by Peter Hessler

Student drafts

November 26: Personal Essay Cont.

Reading: “Losing Religion and Finding Ecstasy in Houston,” by Jia Tolentino

Student drafts

December 3: Life Writing

Reading: Peer recommendations