Ethics in Biography and Memoir  
(BAM 70400)  
Fall 2021

Dr. Ava Chin  
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Mondays, 4:15-6:15pm EST  
Online 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 questions, including: What are the ethics of writers writing about marginalized communities, of which they are not members? What rights do subjects—particularly vulnerable subjects from marginalized communities—have in being harnessed to another person’s framing of their lives? And how do the specific stories that people tell about themselves or others exemplify ethical positions, however unintentionally?

You are required to read one 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 life writing by seeing them through a wide 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: 30%
2. Participation in class, including the addition of at least one ethics question a week from the reading(s): 10%
3. One research paper, 15 pages: 60%  
   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?
- 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?

**Required Texts**
Joseph Mitchell, “Professor Seagull” and *Joe Gould’s Secret* (from *Up in the Old Hotel*)
Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior* and *China Men*
Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments*
Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*
Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
Roxane Gay, *Hunger*
Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*
Hida Viloria, *Born Both*
Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*
Francisco Cantu, *When the River Becomes a Line*

Joan Acocella, from *Twenty-Eight Artists* (on Baryshnikov) [handout]
Janet Malcolm, “41 False Starts” [handout]

**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>No Class (CUNY starts Wed. 8/25)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Aug 30 Introduction to the class &amp; syllabus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Sept 6 <strong>Labor Day, no school</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Sept 13 Joseph Mitchell, <em>Joe Gould’s Secret</em> and “Professor Seagull” (<em>Up in the Old Hotel</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Sept 20 Janet Malcolm, <em>The Journalist and the Murderer</em></td>
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Week 6  
Sept 27  Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior*

Week 7  
Oct 4  MH Kingston, *China Men*

Week 8  
Oct 11  Middle Semester

Week 9  
Oct 18  Vivian Gornick, *Fierce Attachments*

Week 10  
Oct 25  Edmund De Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*

Week 11  
Nov 1  Roxane Gay, *Hunger*

Week 12  
Nov 8  Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*

Week 13  
Nov 15  Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Week 14  
Nov 22  Hida Viloria, *Born Both*

Week 15  
Nov 29  Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Week 16  
Dec 6  Francisco Cantu, *The Line Becomes a River*

Week 17  
Dec 13  Last Class