Fall Semester 2020, Tuesdays, 4:15-6:15, remote
The Biographical Narrative: Forms of Life Writing, BM 70100
The Graduate Center
Brenda Wineapple (bwineapple@earthlink.net)
Office hours (remote) by appointment, Tuesdays before class

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 the unknowable can be made known, to the extent it can; 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:

Remote learning:
This class will be taught remotely, via Zoom (most likely), and so please adjust your time zone accordingly. There's a certain etiquette for remote classes, such as keeping mute while others speak, that we will observe to the best of our ability, and of course we'll all be mindful of the stresses that everyone has to endure these days. That said, I hope we, as members of the class, will all work together to make this a truly exciting, intellectually stimulating semester.

So, 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 that may occur, relevant to the course but not necessarily required..

However, our requirements: on Tuesday Nov. 3rd, each student will submit a working bibliography for their projects. On Tuesday Nov. 10, students will also submit a 3-page (750 words) "review" of one of the books we've read, or a suggested reading assignment-- 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 a short oral summation of their projects; final papers may be due at that time (circa 15-20 pages, 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: Please note, many of the assignments are excerpts or essays that will be sent to you, as indicated, but we will also be reading several books, easily available, in their entirety:

- Robert A. Caro. *Working* (Knopf, paper)
- Julia Blackburn, *Daisy Bates in the Desert* (Vintage, paper)
- Adam Phillips, *On Becoming Freud* (Yale, paper)


**Tuesday, Sept. 1:** Introduction to Biography and our course.
**Tuesday, Sept. 8:** The Art and Craft of Biography (excerpts will be sent, unless otherwise noted, and likely by email):
  - 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. 15:** Biography and History: "Great" Men & Women; Edmund Morris (introduction to *Theodore Roosevelt*); Lytton Strachey, "Florence Nightingale," from *Eminent Victorians.* Janet Flanner, "Fuehrer" (to be sent)
**Tuesday, Sept. 22:** History, Method, and Point of View: Robert A. Caro, excerpt on Richard Russell; Caro, *Working* (chapter to be assigned)
  - Leon Levy Center for Biography Annual Lecture, Judith Thurman. (Today's class ends a bit early, as a consequence.)
**Tuesday, Sept. 29:** NO GC TUESDAY CLASSES.
**Tuesday, Oct. 13:** Biography and Ethics: Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman.*
**Tuesday, Oct. 20:** Tuesday, Oct. 27: Biography and the Absent: Emmanuel Carrère, *The Adversary*
**Tuesday, Nov. 3:** Research methods session. "Roundtable" discussion of projects, remote-style.
Tuesday, Nov. 17: Biography and the Found Imagination: Julia Blackburn, *Daisy Bates in the Desert: A Woman's Life Among the Aborigines*

Tuesday, Nov. 24: Biographical Fragments: Elizabeth Hardwick. *Sleepless Nights*; excerpts from Carolyn Heilbrun, "Writing a Woman's Life."


Tuesday, Dec. 8: Concluding business, final questions. Short paper presentations.

Tuesday, Dec. 15: **Papers due.** TBD process by which you will deliver