**Syllabus**
Gallatin School, NYU
Spring 2012

Lives in Brief
WRTNG-UG 1026
Christopher Bram

Class Friday 12:30-3:15
Room 429
24 Waverly Place
Office hours Friday 10-12 pm
Room 613 Gallatin Building
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Description: "I can never get enough of knowing about other people's lives," said William Maxwell. People love to read biography in many forms: fat books, short obituaries, newspaper feature stories, and magazine profiles. This class will explore the writing of short biography, how you can capture the spirit and shape of one person's life in a few hundred words. We will read a variety of writers, from Sigrid Nunez and Oliver Sacks to Janet Malcolm and Lawrence Weschler, in order to learn tools and methods. Students will write (and rewrite) four papers, ranging from short personal snapshots to detailed book reviews to an interview-derived essay. We will discuss research techniques and ethical issues.

Texts: A FEATHER ON THE BREATH OF GOD by Sigrid Nunez, THE OUTERMOST DREAM by William Maxwell, FOOTSTEPS by Richard Holmes, THE SILENT WOMAN by Janet Malcolm, AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS by Oliver Sacks and A WANDERER IN THE PERFECT CITY by Lawrence Weschler. (For the book review assignment, students are expected to choose a biography on their own and cook it down to its essentials.)

Specifics: This is a writing class and the weight of the grade will depend on four original papers. Class participation is important and will be added to that grade. More than three absences will reduce your grade. Any plagiarism in a paper will result in that paper being given an F. (Plagiarism is the unattributed use of sentences and paragraphs from other sources.) All papers must be turned in on time, with a double-spaced copy given to the teacher and copies distributed to fellow students to read.

Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1 (January 27)

Week 2 (February 3)
Reading assignment: First two chapters of FEATHER ON THE BREATH OF GOD by Sigrid Nunez.
Writing assignment: 100-200 word sketch of a friend or family member. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.

Week 3 (February 10)
Reading assignment: Book review essays from THE OUTERMOST DREAM. We will also discuss the subjects for the students’ book review essay, which means choosing and discussing the biography you will review.

Week 4 (February 17)
Book review essay, 750 to 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.

Week 5 (February 24)
Book review essays will be returned for the next draft.
Reading assignment: Essay on Robert Louis Stevenson in FOOTSTEPS by Richard Holmes.

Week 6 (March 2)
Book review essay, second draft. We will read and discuss a sampling of the new drafts.
Reading assignment: Essay on Percy Shelley in FOOTSTEPS.

Week 7 (March 9)
Discussion of interview technique. Students will divide into pairs, interview each other, and bring in a 200-300 word portrait based on their encounter.
Reading assignment: from A WANDERER IN THE PERFECT CITY by Lawrence Weschler as an introduction to the interview-based profile.
Guest speaker.

Spring break March 16

Week 8 (March 23)
Interview essay, 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: More Lawrence Weschler.

Week 9 (March 30)
Interview essay will be returned for next draft.
Reading assignment: Part One of THE SILENT WOMAN by Janet Malcolm. We will discuss the ethics of biography and the conflict between "the truth" and "a good story."

Week 10 (April 6)
Interview essay, second draft. A sampling will be read and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: Part Two of THE SILENT WOMAN.

Week 11 (April 13)
We will discuss the upcoming long essay/profile, with each student presenting a one-paragraph proposal of whom he or she will be writing about. Reading: Part Three of THE SILENT WOMAN with a concluding discussion.

Week 12 (April 20)
Reading assignment: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS by Oliver Sacks (Preface, "The Last Hippie" and "A Surgeon’s Life.")
Long essay/profile, first draft, 1,000 to 1,500 words.

Week 13 (April 27)
The long essay will be returned for the next draft.
Reading assignment: More Oliver Sacks ("Not Seeing and Seeing," "Prodigies" and "Anthropologist on Mars.")

Week 14 (May 4)
Final class. Long essay/profile, second draft. These will be read and discussed in class. Concluding business.