The Gallatin School of Individualized Study
New York University
Telling The Truth
ELEC-GG 2542
Spring 2014
Thurs. 6:20-9:00 p.m.

Instructor: Scott Korb
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Classroom: 369 Waverly Building, 24 Waverly Place
Office Hours and location: Tues. 12:45-3, Thurs. 12:3; 1 Washington Place, Room 505

Course Description
The slipperiness of nonfiction writing—ostensibly telling the truth in print—has, in recent years, been the subject of some handwringing in the world of writing and publishing. Jonah Lehrer made up Bob Dylan quotes? David Foster Wallace was a fabricator? Jane Goodall plagiarized? John D’Agata failed a fact-check (and then wrote a book with his fact-checker)? These are extreme examples of problems all nonfiction writers face. This nonfiction workshop asks students to try telling the truth in various forms throughout the semester, from memoir to personal essay to literary journalism. All the while, the animating questions will be what it means to tell the truth in these forms and why—or if—telling the truth matters, and whether it is even possible. Is all nonfiction the same? Is any of it ethical? Is, as Janet Malcolm says, the work of a journalist “morally indefensible?” Weekly workshops will engage ideas from readings by Joan Didion, Ariel Levy, Andrea Elliott, James Baldwin, John Jeremiah Sullivan, James Agee, David Foster Wallace, among others.

Course Objectives
This course is designed to call into question notions of truth telling, fact, and verifiability in nonfiction writing in various genres. Students will read and discuss a wide variety of non-fiction works and criticism and produce three pieces of their own in three different modes. Weekly workshop and revision will result in publication-quality essays.

Course Requirements
This course requires engaged reading, active participation in class discussions and workshops, and the composition and revision of three essays in three genres: literary journalism, personal essay, and memoir. The subject matter and length of these essays
will be discussed in class. Students must be prepared for workshop before each class meeting. Final revised essays will be submitted as a portfolio, with previous drafts, at the end of the semester. Class participation and each of the three essays will have equal weight—twenty-five percent—in determining course grades. Workshops will begin in Week 3.

**REQUIRED BOOKS**
*Feel free to read used or library editions of these texts.*

John D’Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact*
James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
Michael Finkel, *True Story*
David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*
John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*
Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
James McBride, *The Color of Water*
Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*

**COURSE CALENDAR**

**WEEK 1**
January 30
INTRODUCTIONS

**WEEK 2**
February 6
• John D’Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact*
WEEK 3
February 13
• James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

WEEK 4
February 20

WEEK 5
February 27
• Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

WEEK 6
March 6
• Michael Finkel, *True Story*

WEEK 7
March 13

**SPRING RECESS—March 17–23**

WEEK 8
March 27
• Josh Roiland, “The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the ‘Reality Boundary’”
WEEK 9
April 3
John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*

WEEK 10
April 10
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

WEEK 11
April 17

WEEK 12
April 24
Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

WEEK 13
May 1
James McBride, *The Color of Water*

WEEK 14
May 8