Syllabus
NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Lives in Brief
WRTNG-UG 1026
Spring 2014

Class: Thursday 6:20-9:00
Room 566-B
24 Waverly Place

Instructor: Christopher Bram
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Office: Room 431 Gallatin Building
Hours: Wednesday 4-5 pm
Thursday 4-6 pm

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.

Course Objectives: To sharpen your general writing skills by writing about other people—not about yourself but about others. (You are present no matter what your subject is.) You will achieve this by writing and sharing your work with your peers and instructor, but also by reading a handful of excellent writers who show different ways to explore human nature. And I hope you will finish the class with a keener appreciation of the vagaries and unpredictability of real people.

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.)

Grading: This is a writing class and the weight of the grade will depend on four original papers. Class participation is important and will be 10 percent of the final grade. More than three absences will reduce your grade.

All papers must be turned in on time, with a double-spaced copy given to the teacher and copies of the first draft passed out to fellow students to read. Late papers will be given a reduced grade.

Academic integrity: 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.) For further details, check the Gallatin Bulletin or website: (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)

Schedule (subject to change)
Week 1 (January 30)
Week 2 (February 6)
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 13)
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 20)
Book review essay, 750 to 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.

Week 5 (February 27)
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 6)
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 13)
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.

Spring break (March 20)

Week 8 (March 27)
Interview essay, 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: More Lawrence Weschler.

Week 9 (April 3)
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 10)
Interview essay, second draft. A sampling will be read and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: Part Two of THE SILENT WOMAN.

Week 11 (April 17)
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 24)
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 (May 1)
The long essay will be returned for the next draft.
Reading assignment: More Oliver Sacks ("Not Seeing and Seeing" and "Anthropologist on Mars."

Week 14 (May 8)
Final class. Long essay/profile, second draft. These will be read and discussed in class. Concluding business.