TELLING THE TRUTH
ELEC-GG 2542
SPRING 2015
THURS. 6:20-9:00 P.M.

Instructor: Scott Korb
E-mail: smk21@nyu.edu
Classroom: Room 601, 1 Washington Place
Office Hours and location: Thurs. 1-4; 1 Washington Place, Room 409

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?”

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, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*
Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murder*
Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*
David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*
W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*
Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
Eula Biss, *On Immunity*

COURSE CALENDAR

WEEK 1
January 29
INTRODUCTIONS

WEEK 2
February 5
• John D’Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact*

WEEK 3
February 12
• James Agee and Walker Evans, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*
WEEK 4  
February 19  
• Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*  
• Leslie Jamison and Jeff Sharlet, “Fail More,” *Oxford American*

WEEK 5  
February 26  
• Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*  

WEEK 6  
March 5  
• Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murder*

WEEK 7  
March 12  
• Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*

**SPRING RECESS—March 16-22**

WEEK 8  
March 26  
• Josh Roiland, “The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the ‘Reality Boundary’”; also known as “David Foster Wallace and the Nature of Fact”
WEEK 9
April 2

**Gallatin Conference:** David Foster Wallace and the Ethics of Writing

Location: 1 Washington Place, 1st Floor

Time: 3:30-9 p.m. [Please attend as much of the conference as you’d like; be sure to attend during our class time.]

Begin W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*

---

WEEK 10
April 9

• W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*

---

WEEK 11
April 16

• Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
• George Orwell, “Why I Write” (1947)

---

WEEK 12
April 23

• John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*

---

WEEK 13
April 30

• James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

---

WEEK 14
May 7

• Eula Biss, *On Immunity*
• Ariel Levy, “Thanksgiving in Magnolia,” *New Yorker*, Nov. 18, 2013