NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Lives in Brief
WRTNG-UG 1026
Spring 2015

Class: Friday 11 am --1:45 pm
Room TBA
1 Washington Place
Instructor: Christopher Bram
email: chris.bram@yahoo.com
Office: Room 431 Gallatin Building
Hours: Thursday 4-5 pm Friday 9 am-11 am

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) five 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, rewriting, and sharing your work with your peers and instructor. You will also learn by reading a handful of excellent writers who show different ways of exploring human nature. And I hope you will finish the class with a keener appreciation of the surprise and complexity of real people.

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

Grading: This is a writing class and the weight of the grade will depend on five original papers. Class participation is important and will be 20 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. Here is the breakdown of how work will affect your final grade:
First sketch: 5%. Book review essay: 20%. Interview exercise: 5%. Interview essay: 20%. Final essay: 30%.

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. (95 pgs.)
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: Four book review essays from THE OUTERMOST DREAM: "The Bohemian Girl," "One Creature," "Giacometti Working," and "Mrs. Woolf." (41 pgs.) We will also discuss the subjects for the students' book review essay, which means choosing the biography you will review. (These books can be anywhere from 100 to 500 pages or more.)

Week 4 (February 20)
Reading assignment: Two more essays from THE OUTERMOST DREAM: "The Outermost Dream of the Reverend Francis Kilvert" and "An Element of Lavishness." (32 pgs.)
Writing assignment: 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, "Travels." (69 pgs.)
Week 6 (March 6)
Writing assignment: Book review essay, second draft. We will read and discuss a sampling of the new drafts.
Reading assignment: Essay on Gerard de Nerval in FOOTSTEPS, “Dreams.” (74 pgs.)

Week 7 (March 13)
Writing assignment: 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: "Shapinsky's Karma" and "Art’s Father, Vladek’s Son." (82 pgs.)

Spring break (March 20)

Week 8 (March 27)
Writing assignment: Interview essay, first draft, 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: More Lawrence Weschler: "Slonimsky's Failure" and "Gary's Trajectory." (105 pgs.)

Week 9 (April 3)
Interview essay will be returned for next draft.
Reading assignment: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS by Oliver Sacks: Preface, "The Last Hippie" and "A Surgeon's Life." (66 pgs.)

Week 10 (April 10)
Writing assignment: Interview essay, second draft. A sampling will be read and discussed in class.
Reading assignment: More Oliver Sacks: “To See and Not See" and "Anthropologist on Mars.” (95 pgs.)

Week 11 (April 17)
Reading assignment: Part One of THE SILENT WOMAN by Janet Malcolm. (65 pgs.) Through this book we will begin to explore the ethics of biography and the conflict between "the truth" and “a good story.”
We will discuss the upcoming long essay/profile, with each student presenting a one-paragraph proposal of their topic.

Week 12 (April 24)
Writing assignment: Long essay/profile, first draft, 1,000 to 1,500 words.
Reading assignment: Part Two of THE SILENT WOMAN. (75 pgs.)
Week 13 (May 1)
The long essay will be returned for the next draft.
Reading: Part Three of THE SILENT WOMAN with a concluding discussion. (66 pgs.)

Week 14 (May 8)
Writing assignment: Long essay/profile, second draft. These will be read and discussed in class.
Closing business.