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, thin books, obituaries, newspaper stories, 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 will find that you are present no matter what your subject is.) You will grow 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. I hope you will finish the class with a keener appreciation of the surprise and contradiction of real people.

Texts: A FEATHER ON THE BREATH OF GOD by Sigrid Nunez, THE OUTERMOST DREAM by William Maxwell, FOOTSTEPS by Richard Holmes, THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACK MAN by Henry Louis Gates, AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS by Oliver Sacks, A WANDERER IN THE PERFECT CITY by Lawrence Weschler, and THE SILENT WOMAN by Janet Malcolm. (For the book review assignment, students are expected to choose a biography on their own, read and write a profile disguised as a 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: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value open and honest intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise academic integrity include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling course work, and cheating. (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/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html)

Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1 (September 8)

Week 2 (September 15)
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 (September 22)
Reading assignment: Book review essays from THE OUTERMOST DREAM: on Virginia Woolf, E. S. Nesbit, Alberto Giacometti, and Colette. We will also discuss the subjects for the students' book review essay, which means choosing and discussing the biography you will review.

Week 4 (September 29)
More essays from THE OUTERMOST DREAM: on Sylvia Townsend Warner and Francis Kilvert. Book review essay, 750 to 1,000 words. These will be read aloud and discussed in class.

Week 5 (October 6)
Book review essays will be returned for the next draft. Reading assignment: Essay on Robert Louis Stevenson in FOOTSTEPS by Richard Holmes.

Week 6 (October 13)
Book review essay, second draft. We will read some of the new drafts. Reading assignment: Two essays in THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACK MAN by Henry Louis Gates (“The Welcome Table” and “The Passing of Anatole Broyard”).

Week 7 (October 20)
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: "Shapinsky's Karma" and "Art's Father."

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

Week 9 (November 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.")

Week 10 (November 10)
Interview essay, second draft. A sampling will be read and discussed in class. Reading assignment: More Oliver Sacks ("Not Seeing and Seeing" and "Anthropologist on Mars.").

Week 11 (November 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 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."

Thanksgiving break: November 24

Week 12 (December 1)
Long essay/profile, first draft, 1,000 to 1,500 words. Reading assignment: Part Two of THE SILENT WOMAN.

Week 13 (December 8)
The long essay will be returned for the next draft. Reading: Part Three of THE SILENT WOMAN with a concluding discussion.

Week 14 (December 15)
Final class. Long essay/profile, second draft. These will be read and discussed in class.

Concluding business.