Telling The Truth
ELEC-GG 2542
Spring 2016
Tues. 6:20-9:00 p.m.

Instructor: Scott Korb
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Classroom: 25 West 4th Street, Room C16
Office Hours and location: Tues. 1:30-3:30; 1 Washington Place, Room 603

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 (and maybe even “autofiction”). 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, some fiction, 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. (There’s also some freedom to write “autofiction.”) 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*
- Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*
- David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*
- Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2*
- Ben Lerner, *10:04*
- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
- John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*
- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

**COURSE CALENDAR**

**WEEK 1**
January 26
**INTRODUCTIONS**

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

**WEEK 3**
February 9
• James Agee and Walker Evans, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*
WEEK 4
February 16
• Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*
• Leslie Jamison and Jeff Sharlet, “Fail More,” *Oxford American*

WEEK 5
February 23
• Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

WEEK 6
March 1
• Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murder*

WEEK 7
March 8
• Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*

SPRING RECESS—March 14–20

WEEK 8
March 22
• David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” “Getting Away From Pretty Much Already Being Away From It All,” *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*
• 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
March 29
• Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2*

WEEK 10
April 5
• Ben Lerner, *10:04*

WEEK 11
April 12
• Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
• George Orwell, “Why I Write” (1947)

WEEK 12
April 19
• John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphead*

WEEK 13
April 26
• James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

WEEK 14
May 3
• Ariel Levy, “Thanksgiving in Magnolia,” *New Yorker*, Nov. 18, 2013