

English 607—Medical Humanities and Life Writing  
(330 Condon, Mondays 9-11:50 a.m.)

Professor Mary Wood  
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Office Hours: M 1-2, Th 11-1  
445 PLC

**Course Description:** This course will explore the crucial role of life writing in the growing field of Medical Humanities. Genres examined in the course will include autobiography, testimony, graphic novel, drama, memoir, essay, and poetry. We will ask: How does the writing of an individual life signify in a field—medicine—that historically imagines aggregate groups rather than individuals? How does narrative or poetry express emotions (suffering, anger, joy, disappointment) in the context of medical constructions of bodily experience? How do the writers we read define health, illness, disability, disease? What does Medical Humanities have to do with Disability Studies, if anything, and how does life writing function within each field? How do economic disparity and the unequal burden of disease emerge in life narratives related to health and illness?

**Texts:**

Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World*

Ellen Forney, *Marbles*

Rafael Campo, *What the Body Told*

Alice Wexler, *Mapping Fate*

Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*

Susanna Kaysen, *The Camera My Mother Gave Me*

Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*

Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*

Articles listed below are available on Canvas (unless otherwise specified), under the appropriate Course Module.

**Reading Schedule:**

**How Do Writers Narrate the Body? How is Diagnosis a Narrative?**

Monday, January 4—Kaysen, *The Camera My Mother Gave Me*.

**How Can We Define Ethical Relations Among Writers and Readers?**

Monday, Jan. 11—Paul John Eakin, “Introduction: Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing”; Rosi Braidotti, “Writing as a Nomadic Subject”; David Palumbo-Liu, excerpt from *The Deliverance of Others*.

**What are the Intersections Between Narrative, Diagnosis, and Genetics?**

Monday, Jan. 18—Holiday/Reschedule. Wexler, *Mapping Fate*. Excerpt from Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*; Lennard Davis, “Biocultures: An Emerging Paradigm.”

**Wednesday, Jan. 20—Performance of *Water by the Spoonful* at University Theater, 8 p.m. Read the play ahead of time if possible.**

**How Can Drama Redefine Diagnosis in the Context of Global Health?**

Monday Jan. 25—Quiara Alegria Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*. Arthur Kleinman, excerpt from *What Really Matters*. Arjun Suri, et al., “Values and Global Health.”

**How Does Narrative Configure the Brain and the Self?**

Monday, Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>-- Eva Feder Kittay, “On the Expressivity and Ethics of Selective Abortion for Disability: Conversations with my Son.” Charlie Gere, “Brains-in-vats, Giant Brains and World Brains: the Brain as Metaphor in Digital Culture”; Niklas Altermark, “The ideology of neuroscience and intellectual disability: reconstituting the ‘disordered’ brain.”

**How are Cultural Narratives of Disability Changing?**

Monday, Feb. 8—Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World*; Lennard Davis, “Disability Studies: The Next Wave or Twilight of the Gods?”

**What Happens When the Graphic Novel Meets Diagnosis?**

Monday, Feb. 15—Ellen Forney, *Marbles*; Jonathan Beckwith, “Whither Human Behavioral Genetics?”; Racine, “Can We Read Minds?”

**What Can Happen When Transgender Theory Meets Disability Studies?**

Monday, Feb. 22—Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride*; Dean Spade, “Mutilating Gender.”

**How Do Cancer Narratives Confront Public Stories of Gender and Race?**

Monday, Feb. 29—Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals*. S. Lochlann Jain, “Cancer Butch.”

**How Does Poetry Speak the Body?**

Monday, March 7—Rafael Campo, *What the Body Told*; Kristin Yarris, “Pensando Mucho’: Embodied Distress Among Grandmothers in Nicaraguan Transnational Families.”

**Course Requirements:**

**Discussion questions:** Each student must prepare 2-3 discussion questions on readings for one class. Your questions should synthesize the readings for that day, suggesting what ideas come up when we read those particular works together. You may choose which week you'd like to present. We'll make up a schedule by the second week of classes.

**Summary of theoretical article:** Please turn in a 1-2-page, two-part summary of a theoretical article read for the class (I will suggest which ones will work for the assignment). You will summarize the article twice, for two different reading audiences. In the first part, you will summarize the article for an academic audience with a specialization in literary studies. In the second part, you will summarize it for a group of first-year college students at a state university. **Due Feb. 15<sup>th</sup>.**

**Essay proposal and annotated bibliography (8-10 entries):** Please turn in a two-page proposal for your final paper. The proposal should offer a hypothesis for the essay, summarize what has already been done by others in the area of study, and present a plan for supporting your argument, including the major texts you will consult. **Annotated Bibliography:** Each entry should be in correct MLA format and should be followed by 2-4 sentences that describe the work and its relevance for your project. . **Due Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup>**

**First 7 pages of essay due March 3rd.** Keep working after you turn these in! I will read the drafts and return them to you with comments by March 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Final essay (14-16 pages plus bibliography) due March 16<sup>th</sup> by 5 p.m.**