CLASS DESCRIPTION:

We’ll begin with Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir about her father, entitled *Fun Home*. Then, we’ll read several short pieces and consider ‘life writing’ as a form. We’ll read extracts from Hermione Lee’s *Biography: A Short Introduction* and Mary Karr’s *The Art of Memoir* (posted at canvas).

Next, we’ll turn to Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* alongside James Baldwin’s “A Letter to My Nephew.”

We’ll then talk about research and about using the library.

We’ll turn next to Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* which takes a look at the biographical fate of American poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Malcolm’s book dramatizes some of the problems faced by the biographer in search of a controversial subject (dealt with by Lee and Karr). With Malcolm’s book we’ll move from work focused on family to work focused on famous people (although we’ll see family certainly plays a role here).

After Plath, we’ll talk about British writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) who offers a wonderful case for the consideration of different categories of life writing: biography, autobiography and memoir. (Indeed, one could teach a whole class on Woolf and Life Writing). And we’ll read Woolf’s playful biography *Flush*. *Flush* focuses on the life of a spaniel who belonged to poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning as it explores the meaning and parameters of biography.

We’ll close the term with two recent texts which weave together autobiography and contemporary politics. Elif Shefak’s *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* and Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby*.

ASSIGNMENT # 1 (due end of week 3): Short reader response on Bechdel and/or Coates. . . (2-3 pages). Find [a] short passage[s] which you think raises some important questions pertaining to an issue related to life writing. You should offer a close reading of the text(s). Please pay attention to issues raised during class discussion—these will guide your choice of cocus.

ASSIGNMENT #2 (end of week 5): in-class writing on Malcolm and Woolf (open book).

ASSIGNMENT #3: (end of term, due Friday of finals week): (5 page paper). The final essay may cover any of the books on the syllabus. I will provide questions if you’d prefer a more directed approach. Please discuss topics with me either in person or via email.
GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Participation and Unannounced Quizzes (short questions works we have read) : 30%
Assignment #1: 20%
Assignment # 2: 20%
Assignment #3: 30%

Reading List:

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.*
Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*
Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman*
Woolf, Virginia. *Flush*
Shefak, Elif. *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division.*
Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby.*

Class Objectives:

1. Hone reading, writing, critical thinking and presentation skills.
2. Gain an understanding of genre.
4. Think about what research entails, and about how to identify and use resources.

READING SCHEDULE:

WEEK ONE

Monday: canceled.

Wednesday:

Introductions/syllabus etc..

WEEK TWO

Monday:

Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (Chapters 1 &2, pp. 3-54).

Wednesday:

Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (pp. 57-150);
Mary Karr *The Art of Memoir* Chapter 1 & 2 (pp. 1-16);

WEEK THREE
Monday:

MLK holiday.

Wednesday:

Finish Bechdel.
Selecting a writing topic; Using the library; Using the web for research; Other resources.

WEEK FOUR

Monday:

Read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* (all)

Read James Baldwin’s “A Letter to My Nephew” (from *The Fire Next Time*)

Wednesday: WRITING EXERCISE DUE. (20%)

WEEK FIVE

Monday:

Read Janet Malcom’s *The Silent Woman* (Part 1)
Read chapter 1 of Hermione Lee’s *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (pp. 1-18; canvas);

Wednesday:

Janet Malcom’s *The Silent Woman* (Part 2)

WEEK SIX

Monday: Janet Malcom’s *The Silent Woman* (Part 3)

Wednesday: IN-CLASS WRITING EXERCISE.

WEEK SEVEN:

Monday: Introducing Virginia Woolf (All readings for today will be on canvas)

Woolf as biographical subject: Read Hermione Lee’s introductory chapter to her *Virginia Woolf*; Alexandra Harris’ *Virginia Woolf*; extracts from de Salvo; (on canvas)

Woolf as autobiographer/memoirist: *Moments of Being* (extract)
Woolf as biographer: extracts from Roger Fry; from Orlando; from Strachey; “Art of Biography”; “The New Biography”; “Lives of the Obscure”; my Hogarth Press intro.

Wednesday:

Woolf’s Flush (Chapters 1-2). Be sure to read notes also: these are Woolf’s.

WEEK EIGHT

Monday:

Woolf’s Flush (Chapter 3-4).

Wednesday:

Woolf’s Flush (Chapter 5-6).

WEEK NINE

Monday/Wednesday:

Read and discuss Elif Shefak’s How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division.

WEEK TEN

Monday/Wednesday:

Read and discuss Rebecca Solnit’s The Faraway Nearby.

WRITING WORKSHOPS!

FINAL PAPERS are due uploaded to Canvas on the FRIDAY of FINALS WEEK.