

**Duke University TIP Summer Studies Program 2017**  
**Creative Non-Fiction**

*Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story: Biography, Memoir, and Creative Non-Fiction*

Rice University, Term 1  
Instructor: Jessica Gokhberg

**Required Texts:**

*You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Non-Fiction*, Lee Gutkind (Ed.)  
*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser  
*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Allison Bechdel [or *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir*, Liz Prince]  
*Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay

**Required Materials:**

Journal  
Writing utensils  
Colored pencils  
Flashdrive

**Course Description:**

Pop culture is full of attempts to narrate history, both personal and public. *Hamilton* is onstage, reimagining the American revolution as a hip hop drama; documentaries and podcasts like *Making a Murderer* and *Serial* are binge-worthy; the rise of the personal essay has increasingly conflated memoir and journalism; and we narrate, archive, and curate our own lives on social media sites like Vine, Twitter, and Instagram.

In this class, students will study the intersection of history and narrative: biography, memoir, documentary, personal essay, and creative-nonfiction. They will investigate the historical accuracy of *Hamilton*, conduct research to create biographies of historical figures, and draft their own memoirs. They will confront the ethical dilemmas of creative nonfiction and compare competing narratives of history (e.g., the story of Christopher Columbus). They will delve into anthropology with Claude Levi-Strauss and examine the narrative paradigm with Walter Fisher.

**Course Objectives:**

- To acquire basic knowledge of genres and forms of historical and nonfictional writing.
- Gain a better understanding of yourself as a writer and insight into your writing process.
- To explore the ethics of narrating your own life and the lives of others.
- To analyze themes and styles of published narratives as models for your own work.
- To read colleagues' work with authority, compassion, and insight.
- To interact effectively and respectfully in a group work setting on projects related to personal storytelling.

\*A Note on Content. As a class largely about exploring the ethics of narrative and experimenting with related genres, we will often be discussing topics that are personal or contentious. Thus, students are expected to respect our classroom community. It is crucial that we treat each other

with the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. No one should be made to feel unwelcome, particularly as we will spend significant time discussing the topics of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Part of being in this class is learning how to be a responsible and effective member of a literary community, to be aware of the audience, and of the purposes of different types of writing. *If you have any questions or concerns about the material discussed in class or behavior exhibited by fellow students or by me, I encourage and welcome you to approach me individually. Please also remember that we have an on-site psychological counselor that is here to help you with any questions you may be working through.*

### **Assignments and Grading:**

Students will be responsible for keeping a daily journal, completing a group research project and presentation, writing memoirs in two forms and in three tenses, conducting two interviews and integrating them into podcasts, an extensive place- or object-centered essay, a review, and controlling a class Instagram account for an entire day.

\*Attentive and Active Participation is Vital. Students will be expected to actively participate in class discussions and small-group workshops, and thoughtfully respond to both assigned texts and the work of peers. I expect each student to come to class prepared to work the brain, which means asking questions, underlining important passages, taking notes, and writing!

\*In-Class Writing. Each week, we will do in-class writing exercises designed to help generate new ideas, begin new pieces, and/or revise existing work. Some of these may remain unfinished; others will become essays in themselves. Everyone must write for the entire time given for the exercise.

\*Journal Entries. To get in the habit of writing every day, each student will keep a journal that I will read. These will be collected at least twice each week. At a minimum, I should see a 250-word response to a writing topic that I will provide. Students are, however, free to write more than required.

\*Final Anthology. In addition to the final biography group project, at the end of the term, each student will submit one completed written and one oral text to include in a class anthology that will be shared with the whole class. Near the end of term, we will host a competition for cover design, so start collecting ideas!

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### WEEK 1

#### Monday: Introductions

##### **Morning**

##### Introductions

Pair & share: learn your partner's preferred name, pronoun, a reason they chose this course, and a fun fact

Review course objectives and materials

Class-wide icebreaker game

##### Policies

Phone/laptop/bathroom

First five minutes of class typically writing in journal

No homework; keep materials in class

Explain seminar format

##### *Break*

##### Close reading of the title

What does each word mean/evoke?

How can we relate the words in different ways?

Journal: choose one word from the title and write freely on its meaning/history from what you already know

(Game) two truths and a lie

##### Reading time

“Nonfiction as Literature” (Zinsser 95-99)

“Write as Well as You Can” (Zinsser 295-303)

“How to Read” (Gutkind 100-104)

##### **Afternoon**

Lecture: defining “narrative”

Policies and guidelines for writing consultations

Introduce first week's topic: biography

(Game) whole class writes a biography together, line by line

##### *Break*

Present first lines of biographies

Writing activity: write three versions of the first line of your biography

Workshop first lines

##### **Evening study**

Write a letter as yourself today, to yourself at the end of the term

#### Tuesday: Introducing biography

##### **Morning**

Journal: on specificity

Write on something you saw or did yesterday/this morning

Answer the five W's

Write about as much detail as possible  
Discuss Zinsser pieces  
Thinking about our own writing processes  
Write “How to” piece on your own writing process

*Break*

Lecture: hermeneutic circle

Biography exercise

Pair up

Without predetermining what questions you’ll ask, start interviewing your partner  
Ask respectful questions, and respect when your partner does not want to answer something

Be creative with questions and answers!

Write a biography of your partner based on these notes

### **Afternoon**

Read biographies out loud to class

Discuss the process of interviewing and answering: how did it feel?

How is or isn’t a biography a narrative?

Fact vs. truth?

What kind of “untruths” does narrative require of a writer?

Narrative vs. rhetoric or propaganda

Reading time

*Alexander Hamilton* (Chernow Table of Contents; 7-12, handout)

*Break*

Discussion of *Hamilton* beginning

How did the first line compare to yours?

What were your feelings of the first six pages?

What information did you learn?

What information didn’t you learn?

Lecture: history and narrative

Close reading work

Reread first paragraphs of *Hamilton* together

What looks like fact? Fiction?

What appears from what we’ve learned of narrative?

### **Evening study**

Write a completely fictitious biography of yourself

Wednesday:

#### **Morning**

Journal: on showing, not telling

Describe an object or feeling without using its name

Pair & share

Share on observations from last night’s reading, and choose two observations from each partner to share with the class

Split class into groups of two

Look through *The Greatest Things Ever Told* together for inspiration (and fun)  
Decide on whose biography you'd like to write  
Write down a list of ten questions you need to answer in order to write this biography (to be turned in for my review that evening)

Reading time

*Hamilton: The Revolution* (Table of Contents; 10-20, handout); watch clips of *Hamilton* onstage

### **Afternoon**

Discussion: compare two Hamilton biographies

Forms

Style

Facts

Lecture: creative non-fiction

What is it?

Genres

Fact-checking

*Break*

Listen: *Hamilton* soundtrack

Discuss how the play begins its biography: "Alexander Hamilton"

Then continue listening: "Helpless," "Ten Duel Commandments," "Guns and Ships," "The Room Where it Happens," "The Shuyler Sisters," "Satisfied," "Wait For It," "My Shot," "Yorktown")

Take notes while listening on facts you hear or don't hear, genre characteristics, what it feels like to listen to history

Imagine you're in a Broadway theater: how is your relationship to each of the three texts different? How does that affect your imagination of a biography?

How do biographies end?

Compare all three: read aloud together the last pages of *Alexander Hamilton* and *Hamilton: The Revolution* (handouts); listen to last four songs on soundtrack

Seminar discussion

What do we think an ending should do for a narrative? For a biography?

How is the biography ended (or not) in each of the three forms?

From just the excerpts we attended to in class, which form did you learn the most from? The least from? Why?

### Thursday: Ethics of Telling

#### **Morning**

Journal: write a biography of yourself (in the third-person) using your best first-line

Lecture: Levi-Strauss, anthropology and documentation

Screening

*The Making of a Murderer* E1

Take notes while watching

*Break*

Class activity

Map out the strategies of the filmic documentary form

How was interview used?

How was biography used?

What other documentary techniques and resources used can we identify?

Reading time

Free reading of *The Greatest Stories Never Told*

### **Afternoon**

Lecture: minority voices in narrative

Thinking class, race, and gender: what do these words mean?

Why are there “great stories never told”?

Who tells, who doesn’t?

What work in telling does *Hamilton* and *TMoAM* do?

Seminar reading and discussion

Look at lyrics and re-listen to songs; view clips of onstage performance

How can we reread these pieces, paying attention to class, race, and gender?

### **Evening study**

Design t-shirts

### Friday: Research

#### **Morning**

Journal: narrate from a different perspective (an object or animal)

Get back into biography groups

Look over my comments

Add ten more questions

Consider how you have or haven’t represented minority voices

*Break*

Reading time

“Methods” (Zinsser 49-94)

Lecture: computer lab behavior and research methods

#### **Afternoon**

Computer lab

Partner research for biography

### Saturday: Writing

Computer lab

Co-writing the biography

## WEEK 2

### Monday: Presentations

#### **Morning**

Computer lab

Return to biography

Plan out presentation

#### **Afternoon**

Presentations

Journal: how did it feel to be a biographer? Was the research or the co-writing process harder?

Why?

Lecture: personal essay

What is it? How does it differ from the other genres we've seen?

#### **Evening study**

Reading time

Introduction to *Bad Feminist*

Submit one question to be used for journal entries

### Tuesday: The Personal Essay

#### **Morning**

Diary: choose from submitted questions

Discussion: just from introductions, what differences and similarities have you noticed from our previously covered genres?

Lecture: Fisher's narrative paradigms

*Break*

Writing time

Choose a diary entry you've done so far, and use the entire time given to expand that writing

Workshop

Peer writing consultations

#### **Afternoon**

Writing time

Use the entire time given to continue to revise and expand your extended diary entry

Reading time

Woolf, "The Death of the Moth" (handout)

Fuentes, "How I Started to Write" (handout)

*Break*

Seminar discussion

Thinking about class, race, and gender again

How does the personal essay vs. the biography address these issues?

Reading time

Selections from *Bad Feminist*

Seminar discussions

What is it like reading personal essays from writers closer to your age?  
What characteristics of style were different?

### **Evening study**

Computer lab

Type up extended journal entry

### Wednesday: Improving group discussion

#### **Morning**

Journal entry: choose from submitted questions

Lecture: Tina Fey's rules for improvisation

(Game) Scenes from a hat

*Break*

Computer Lab

Finish typing up extended journal entries

Reading time

"The Creative Nonfiction Police" (Gutkind 32-43)

"The Tribulations of the Writer at Work" (Gutkind 83-88)

#### **Afternoon**

Discussion of Gutkind readings

Group discussions

Groups of 4-5

Choose an essay from *Bad Feminist* and read together (out loud)

Write up two questions that can be asked of any of the stories in the anthology that you think could guide someone's reading of a personal essay

Pass one question to the right and one question to the left

Have a discussion based on the two questions you received

*Break*

Groups report back on questions and their answers

### **Evening study**

Writing out loud: narrate and record a personal story out loud

### Thursday: Interviewing

#### **Morning**

Journal entry: stage an interview with yourself

*Break*

Writing

Use the entire time to plan and write questions

First identify objectives of the interview

Then write the sequence of questions you'd like to ask

Workshopping

Split into groups of two

"Speed-date" writing consultations

Revising

Return to your objectives and questions  
Integrate feedback from workshops and edit

### **Afternoon**

Introduce Podcast project

Listen: *Serial*

S1E1

Take notes as you go on style and form

Seminar discussion

Podcast vs. book vs. documentary

Binge-culture

What expectations do we have of some forms and not others?

Split into groups of two

Write an introduction and narrative for the Podcast of each set of questions

### **Evening study**

Process checks

Friday:

#### **Morning**

Journal

Fun Friday: (game) circumlocution charades, then journal reflection

Review results of process checks

Collaborative sessions on interviews

Run through your two sets of interviews in front of another pair to receive feedback

*Break*

Groups work to revise and expand narratives for Podcasts

Listen: *Serial*

S1E2

After doing some work on your interviews and narratives, what observations do you have on the second episode?

Reading time

“Writing About People: The Interview” (Zinsser 100-115)

“The Sound of Your Voice” (Zinsser 231-240)

Saturday

Titles for Podcasts and episodes

<http://list25.com/25-unintentionally-funny-newspaper-headlines/>

Computer lab

Record Podcasts

Individual conferences

## WEEK 3

### Monday: Writing about ourselves

#### **Morning**

Journal: write about an important event in your life from the past

Listen to everyone's podcasts

Lecture: memoir

Introduce *Fun Home* and *Tomboy*, explaining student option

What is it? How does it differ from the other genres we've seen?

#### *Break*

Writing exercise

This one will remain handwritten—difference in formality

Write an extensive description about either a day in the life of an object or a place

Encourage creative ideas with: [https://www.buzzfeed.com/lukelewis/inanimate-objects-with-secret-inner-lives?utm\\_term=.xhQ9113gY#.aqm1j93GL](https://www.buzzfeed.com/lukelewis/inanimate-objects-with-secret-inner-lives?utm_term=.xhQ9113gY#.aqm1j93GL)

Introduce class anthology project and rules for cover design

#### **Afternoon**

Reading time

“Humor” (Zinsser 207-230)

“Enjoyment, Fear, and Confidence” (Zinsser 241-252)

“Writing About Yourself: The Memoir” (Zinsser 132-146)

“The Memoir Craze” (Gutkind 57)

“Between Memoir and Autobiography” (Gutkind 58)

Seminar discussion of readings

Look at “Hall of Fame Fakers” (Gutkind 15) together

Writing time: think through your choice of either *Fun Home* or *Tomboy*

To be handed in for me to read that evening

#### **Evening study**

Work on cover designs

### Tuesday: Forms and genres of memoir

#### **Morning**

Journal: narrate an event from yesterday or this morning in at least five panels

Reminder of expectations to respect one another's personal stories as we read texts that address gender, class, and sexuality

Lecture: on gender, class, and sexuality, and the Bechdel Test

#### *Break*

Reading time

*Fun Home* (or *Tomboy*), first half

Writing time

Reflect on first impressions of the text. Be as honest as you can, no one but you will read this reflection

## **Afternoon**

Seminar discussion of the text(s)

*Break*

Introduce memoir project

In comic book or graphic novel form (or an alternative drawn form proposed by students)

Create an outline of what life events you'll narrate

Workshop with partner

Revise

## **Evening study**

Independent writing time: work on any writing pieces you haven't finished or want to develop more fully, or the cover design

## Wednesday: Creating the memoir

### **Morning**

Journal: write a detailed description of yourself in the present

Reading time

*Fun Home* (or *Tomboy*)

*Break*

Independent work time on memoir

A chance to meet with me to discuss the texts one-on-one

### **Afternoon**

Workshop what you have of your memoir with a rotation of three partners

Introduce student teaching

Read and summarize a piece of your choice from one of our texts, and present three questions to lead some discussion on issues raised by the piece

Time to look through materials and choose a text to teach on

### **Evening study**

Reading piece chosen for student teaching

## Thursday

### **Morning**

Journal: write a detailed description of yourself in the future

Time to organize your notes for student teaching

Free reading time

*Fun Home*, *Tomboy*, or other readings you either didn't finish or want to do

*Break*

Time to finalize your notes for student teaching

Student teaching presentations

### **Afternoon**

Finish memoirs

*Break*

Choose one of the journal entries you wrote in the past, present, or future tense and expand

Workshop and revise

**Evening study**

Independent writing/reading/drawing time

Friday: Wrapping up

**Morning**

Journal: what was your favorite text or activity from this class, and why? What was your least favorite, and why?

Present memoirs to class

*Break*

Wrap up discussion questions

Vote on cover for anthology

**Afternoon**

Look through all materials produced in the class and choose one written text you'd like to include in the anthology

Return letters from day one

Write new letters for next summer

Instructor/TA surveys