

English 238: Confessions, Memoir and Life Writing

Course Description:

This course will invite students to follow a historical trajectory of life writing from St. Augustine's *Confessions* (400 AD) to Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015). As well as examining a full range of different kinds of life writing, including diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, and eye-witness reportage, we will consider and discuss shifting attitudes toward the very idea of "the self," and its relationship to particular kinds of cultural production. What makes the act of writing especially amenable to bringing the self into focus? Does the written word reveal an already fully-formed self, or does it invent a self that resides only in literary form? Is the literary self necessarily a fictionalized self? This course will consider the different kinds of selves that emerge in response to social, political, and cultural movements, culminating with an assessment of the modern and postmodern self. Students who take English 238 should expect to finish the term with a comprehensive sense of various life-writing traditions. They should also expect to read and write voluminously as they come to grips with a rich, important, and oft-overlooked literary mode.

Learning Objectives:

Students who take this course will:

- Cultivate a broad and sophisticated understanding of the historical development of life writing forms
- Hone critical and analytical proficiency through the close, attentive reading of literary texts
- Write with increasing precision and clarity of mind about the relationships between texts and their various contexts
- Develop proficiency in research and methodological practices

Required Texts:

St. Augustine. *Confessions*

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

Readings from Joan Didion, George Orwell, and Mass-Observation (*May the Twelfth*)

Short readings will be uploaded to the web. It is your responsibility to print these off and have them with you during class sessions.

Method of Evaluation:**Class Engagement: 10%**

Active, engaged, collaborative participation is crucial to the experience of a humanities education. Be prepared to contribute and help to build a vigorous, stimulating intellectual community

Reading Quizzes: 10%

Reading quizzes will be administered **at the beginning of class, randomly**. The quizzes will test your basic knowledge and understanding of the assigned reading for that particular day.

October the Twelfth Assignment: 25%

Riffing on the Surrealist Mass-Observation book *May the Twelfth* (1937), a montage of diary reports written on the date of the coronation of King George VI, students will write, edit, and publish a digital collection of their day-reports on the date of March 12, 2017. Divided into four headings—Dreams, Home, Work, and Leisure—the volume will aspire to be what Mass-Observation wanted its collection to represent: a record of the collective consciousness of a group of people who may know little about one another, but who share time and space. March 12 may be a perfectly ordinary day. *March the Twelfth*, however, promises to elevate everyday-ness to the status of the extraordinary.

Submissions to Area Editors due 13 October 2017 (Friday)**Final Project: 30%**

The final project may take one of any number of forms. You will write either a research paper (8 pages, 2500 words) or a piece of literary non-fiction modelled on one of the texts on the course syllabus (10 pages, 3000 words). In either case, the final projects should represent a substantial response to the core concerns of the course as a whole.

Final Exam: 25%

Date: TBA

NB: Written assignments must be submitted in hard copy, in class on their respective due dates. I will not accept email submissions.

Students must submit all assignments for this course to receive a passing grade.

Late work will receive a penalty of 10% off the final grade for each day following deadline.

Course Trajectory**Week One (6 September): Life Writing and the Writing Life**

Joan Didion, “Why I Write” and “On Keeping a Notebook”

George Orwell, “Why I Write,” “A Hanging,” and “Shooting an Elephant”

Week Two (11 September, 13 September): The New Confessional

James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

Week Three (18 September, 20 September): The Birth of Confessional Writing

St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Week Four (25 September, 27 September): Memory and Memoir

St. Augustine, *Confessions* cont.

Week Five (2 October, 4 October): Essay Writing Workshop / In-class Essay

Week Six (11 October, 13 October): The Collective Self

Mass Observation, *May the Twelfth*

NB: No class 9 Monday (Thanksgiving)

*****October the Twelfth submissions due to area editors, Friday 13 October*****

Week Seven (16 October, 18 October): Everyday Life, Extraordinary Life

Mass-Observation, *May the Twelfth*, cont.

Week Eight (23 October, 25 October): Articulating Life

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

Week Nine (30 October, 1 November): Narrative, History, Autobiography

Douglas, Cont.

Week Ten (6 November, 8 November): Life, Life Writing, Empathy

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Week Eleven (13 November, 15 November): Epistemological Crises

Bechdel, *Fun Home*, cont.

Week Twelve (20 November, 22 November): Black Lives Matter

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Week Thirteen (27 November, 29 November): Class Review

Attendance Policy:

Attendance is mandatory. If you miss five classes unexcused, you will automatically receive a grade of Incomplete Fail

Technology Policy:

A 2011 study at the University of Michigan found that 75% of students reported “using a laptop during class increased the amount of time they spent on non-course work.” 35% of students reported having spent “more than ten minutes per class using social media sites and email.” In light of this study, I have a strict ban on digital/communications technologies in class, including e-books. **Without exception, laptops, tablets, and cell-phones must be stowed away in bags for the duration of class time.**

Learning Assistance:

Accommodations and support for students with disabilities is a shared responsibility between the students, the Student Accessibility & Accommodation Services, faculty and all University personnel. Students requesting accommodations are responsible for providing the appropriate documentation which supports their requests. Students are also responsible for communicating requests as early as possible to allow the service provider adequate time to respond. For more information, please consult the Student Accessibility and Accommodation Services website: <http://www.ubishops.ca/future-current-students/student-campus-life/student-services/student-accessibility-accommodation-services/>

Statement on Academic Integrity:

Plagiarism is a major academic offence and tough penalties apply (see the section “Academic Integrity” in the Academic Calendar). Make sure you know what plagiarism is. Ignorance is no defence. The Dean of Arts and Science will be notified about all cases of plagiarism and a note will be made in the student’s personal file.

If a student has any question about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, it is that student’s responsibility to clarify the matter by conferring with the instructor and to seek out other resources available on the campus. **Any assignment deemed to have been plagiarized will receive a grade of zero.**