Spring 2013

**English 4579  Special Topics in Nonfiction: Life Narratives**
Tu-Th 9:35 - 10:55 a.m.
Journalism Building 0371
Instructor: David Herman
Office: 409 Denney (office hours T-Th 11:15 - 11:45, 2:15 - 3:15, and by appointment)
Phone: 292-6123; e-mail: herman.145[at]osu.edu

Web address for this syllabus: <http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/herman145/ENG4579.html>

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

What attributes define the story of a life? What "turning points" would you emphasize if you had to tell your own or a friend's or loved one's life story? How has the rise of digital culture changed the way life narratives are produced and interpreted? Addressing questions of this sort, our course will explore varieties of life narratives--including biography, autobiography, memoir, and oral history--across several storytelling media, including print texts, graphic narratives, audio- and videorecorded oral histories stored in databases, and other digital environments such as blogs.

To examine the structure, impact, and enduring interest of such life narratives, we will draw on a range of analytic tools, including ideas from narrative theory, social psychology, ethnography, and sociolinguistics, among other fields. Genres we will investigate include slave narrative (Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*), Holocaust testimony (Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*), and memoir (Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*); graphic life narratives, including Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and David Small's *Stitches*; and works that play with the conventions of biography and autobiography, including Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, and Coetzee's *Summertime*. We will also read blogs, study videorecorded interviews, and examine oral histories obtained via StoryCorps and other databases.

Although it focuses on ways of engaging with life narratives in particular, the class will provide you with new tools for analyzing, appreciating, and writing coherently and persuasively about stories of all sorts, enabling you to acquire or sharpen interpretive skills that will assist you in your lifelong practice of reading, analysis, appreciation, and argumentation.

**REQUIRED TEXTS**

The following published life narratives are listed in the order in which we will read/discuss them. Hard copies are available at SBX and other area bookstores:

I also ordered the Vintage edition of the text (ISBN 067972463X)

--Also, in addition to (auto)biographical sketches, oral histories, illness blogs, and other online life narratives listed in the course schedule below, we will discuss two films: *The Pianist* (2002), directed by Roman Polanski, and *Into the Wild* (2007), directed by Sean Penn. I have requested that these films be made available to you via the online streaming service supported by OSU's Media Library. Go to https://drm.osu.edu/media/ and watch the tutorial titled "Viewing Titles as Student." See the course schedule below for further information about when we will discuss these films.

Critical sources available online or else on Carmen via e-reserves (click here for full bibliographic citations for these sources):

---Abbott, H. Porter. "Character and Self in Narrative"
----- "Diary"
---Brockmeier, Jens. "Autobiographical Time"
---Chute, Hilary. "Comics Form and Narrating Lives"
---Eakin, Paul John. "Eye and I: Negotiating Distance in Eyewitness Narrative"
----- "Living Autobiographically"
----- "The Referential Aesthetic of Autobiography"
---Farred, Grant. "Autobiography"
---Fritsch, Esther. "Slave Narrative"
---Gutenberg, Andrea. "Coming-out Story"
----- "Narrative Worldmaking in Graphic Life Writing"
---Hydén, Lars-Christer. "Medicine and Narrative"
---Iadonisi, Rick. "Bleeding History and Owning His [Father's] Story: *Maus* and Collaborative Autobiography"
---Kindt, Tom. "Biography"
---Linde, Charlotte. "Life Story"
---Löschnig, Martin. "Autobiography"
---Luckhurst, Roger. "Reflections on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*"
---McAdams, Dan P. "Personal Narratives and the Life Story"
---McAdams, Dan P., and Jonathan M. Adler, "Autobiographical Memory"
---McCarthy, Margaret. "Bildungsroman"
---Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature"
---Ritchie, Donald A. "Oral History"
---Rittvoi, Andrea. "Explaining People: Narrative and the Study of Identity"
---Schwarz, Daniel R. "Holocaust Narrative"
---Scott, A.O. "Review of *Into the Wild*"
---Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, "Life Narratives: Definitions and Distinctions" and "Life Narrative in Historical Perspective"
---Zipfel, Frank. "Non-fiction Novel"
SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS

Texts relevant for our course that are on print reserve at Thompson Library or available via the OSU Library catalogue:


Other relevant online sources and resources:

--A/B: Auto/Biography Studies: on-campus access to this journal available via <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ab_autobiography_studies/>; from off campus log in and select this title in the "Journal Title" field in the library catalog
--Biography: on-campus access to this journal available via <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/biography/>; from off campus log in and select this title in the "Journal Title" field in the library catalog --Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (UK); log in via the OSU Library catalogue: <http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=b5849565~S7>
--American National Biography Online; log in via the OSU Library catalogue: <http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=b5250611~S7>
--Dictionary of Literary Biography; log in via the OSU Library catalogue: <http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=b6832184~S7>
--Biography Reference Bank; log in via the OSU Library catalogue: <http://library.ohio-state.edu/record=e1000945~S7>
--Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai‘i, Life Writing Resources and Links page: <http://www.hawaii.edu/biograph/cbrlinks.html>
--Kingston University's Centre for Life Narratives: <http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/life-narratives/>
--Northwestern University's Foley Center for the Study of Lives and Life Stories: <https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/research/stories/>
--Rutgers University Oral History Archive: <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/>
--H-net (Humanities and Social Sciences Online) List of Oral History Projects: <http://www.h-net.org/~oralhist/projects.html>
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There are 5 basic requirements for this course:

1. **Class participation and attendance.** To be successful, this class needs to be a collective endeavor—that is, a shared engagement with our focal texts—and to that end your attendance and participation are crucial. You will get more out of each class if you have done the assigned reading and are prepared to discuss it. For the same reason, more than two unexcused absences will lower your grade for the course by one whole grade: for example, from a B to a C. Furthermore, after four absences you will receive a failing grade for the class.

2. **Posting two agenda-setting questions on Carmen.** To facilitate your preparation and enhance class discussions, each student will be required to post two, carefully articulated agenda-setting questions, on two different occasions during the semester. All questions should be posted by 5 p.m. on the day before the relevant class meeting (late posts will be graded down); by the same token, before coming to class you should read and give some careful thought to the questions that others have posted. Click here for a schedule for the Carmen posts for our class.

   Each post should be a paragraph (around 250 words) in length and should zero in on some issue or cluster of issues in the text that you would like the class as a whole to address. Your question should be concerned in some way with the focal theme of our course—life narratives—but you are free to probe any aspect of that theme, using any aspect of the text you consider to be interesting or significant.

3. **Two reading journals.** Twice during the semester—on January 26 and on March 30—you will submit a reading journal through the Dropbox function on our Carmen site. Selecting a specific scene from two different life narratives we will have read before your journals are due, you will write 2 paragraphs per narrative, for a total of 4 paragraphs. Your journal entries should put the focal scenes you have chosen into dialogue with the critical sources we are also reading this term. Further, be sure to save a copy of these journal entries because one (or more) of them might very well turn out to be the seed for one of your essay projects for the course.

   How can any of our critical sources illuminate the life narratives you've chosen? Conversely, do the narratives "speak back" to the critical sources—that is, cause you to question the scope or relevance of the critical sources' arguments when it comes to these particular texts?

4. **Two essay projects: a shorter mid-semester essay and a longer final project.** These essays are to be submitted via the Dropbox function on Carmen. The mid-semester essay is to be 1,250 - 1,500 words and is due Thursday, February 14. The final project is to be 2,000 - 2,500 words and is due the last day of class, Thursday, April 18. Topics for the mid-semester essay will be distributed well in advance of its due date. For your final project, you will do an in-depth analysis of one of our case studies (not the same one you write about in your first essay), bringing to bear on your chosen text ideas developed in our critical sources and possibly in other sources as well. A one-page prospectus for your final project, in which you describe what aspects of your case study you'll be focusing on, is due Thursday, March 21.

   For general guidelines concerning how to compose and format your papers, click here. Grading rubrics for your essays can be found below. Also, an important note: Your papers must represent your own work; all cases of suspected plagiarism will be reported, in accordance with university rules, to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses at OSU and will be reported to the appropriate officers of the university. Plagiarism is the representation of another's work or ideas as one's own; it includes unacknowledged quotations as well as paraphrases of someone else's words or ideas. Penalties may range from failure of the particular assignment, to failure of the course, or worse. For more about OSU's Code for Student Conduct, click here.
5. **Comprehensive final examination.** We will discuss the format for the final exam as we get closer to the end of the term.

**COMPLETING ASSIGNMENTS**

All assigned readings must be read before the date listed on the syllabus. If an emergency arises and prevents you from turning in your written assignments on time, please contact me as far ahead in advance as possible. In the absence of any previous consultation with me, work handed in late will be graded down, normally one letter grade for each day that it is late.

**BASIS FOR FINAL GRADES**

In-class participation and posting of discussion question on Carmen = 15%
Reading journals = 15%
First essay = 20%
Final project (including prospectus) = 30%
Final exam = 20%

Grading rubric for papers:

"A" papers feature compelling arguments, closely analyze passages or engage carefully with other features of the text, are written in clear prose, and teach me something valuable about the subject of the paper.
"B" papers share many of these same qualities, but require more development conceptually or stylistically.
"C" papers feature mediocre arguments and/or writing skills, and lower grades will be below-average ("D") or seriously deficient ("E") in these respects.

**OTHER POLICIES**

Cellphones and laptops:

Please make sure that cellphones are turned off before you enter the classroom. Also, although it's fine to use tablet computers or laptops to take notes during our class meetings, I would greatly appreciate your NOT using your computer to surf the web, update your Facebook page, etc. Again, the more collaborative and interactive our class discussions are, the more effective the course will be. How you handle this aspect of our time together in class meetings will affect your participation grade.

Special needs:

Anyone who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Anyone with such needs should also be aware of the Office for Disability Services in room 150 Pomerene Hall (614-292-3307; TDD 292-0901) which provides services for students with documented disabilities.

The Writing Center:

All members of the OSU community are invited to discuss their writing with a trained consultant at the Writing Center. Go to [http://www.cstw.org](http://www.cstw.org) or call 688-4291 to make an appointment.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**
The following is tentative course schedule. Depending on the actual pace at which we proceed during the semester, we may have to make adjustments to the syllabus as we go.

**Part I: Auto/biography, Oral History, and Related Modes**

**January**

T 8  Introduction; read this webpage containing three autobiographical sketches written by Abraham Lincoln during the period 1858-60, as well as the entry on Lincoln in the American National Biography Online database, available via the OSU Library (log in and enter Lincoln's name under the "search by name field" if the previous hyperlink does not work); also read (on Carmen) Smith and Watson, "Life Narratives: Definitions and Distinctions" and "Life Narrative in Historical Perspective"

>>recommended reading: Wikipedia entries on autobiography, biography, diary, family history, memoir, obituary, oral history

Th 10  Continued discussion of the theory and practice of life narrative; read this autobiographical sketch by D.H. Lawrence, as well as this entry on Lawrence in The Dictionary of Literary Biography database, available via the OSU Library (log in and enter Lawrence's name under the "named author" search field if the previous hyperlink does not work--read Brian Murray's biography of Lawrence considered as a writer of short fiction); also read (on Carmen) Abbott, "Diary"; Kindt, "Biography"; Linde, "Life Story"; Löschnigg, "Autobiography"

>>recommended reading: Ritivoi, "Explaining People" [Carmen]

T 15  Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; also read (on Carmen) Fritsch, "Slave Narrative"; McCarthy, "Bildungsroman"

>>recommended reading (on Carmen): Abbott, "Character and Self in Narrative"; McAdams, "Personal Narratives"

Th 17  *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; also read Olney, "Slave Narratives" [Carmen]

T 22  Oral history: read the transcripts of the interviews with Willie T. Allen and Franzetta Sanders on the University of Southern Mississippi's online Civil Rights Documentation Project; also listen to the following oral testimonies about 9/11 on the StoryCorps website: Joseph Lutario, Lee and Eunice Hanson, John Yates, Steve Giacchi, Phyllis Johnson and Danny Perasa, and watch these videorecorded interviews with 9/11 responders included on a segment of CBS News' 60 Minutes news magazine; also read Ritchie, "Oral History" [Carmen]

>>recommended reading: Adler and Poulin, "Narrating 9/11" [Carmen]

**Part II: Holocaust Narratives**

Th 24  Continued discussion of oral history (as necessary); Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*; also read Schwarz, "Holocaust Narrative" [Carmen]

FIRST READING JOURNAL due Saturday, January 26, by 11:59 p.m.

T 29  *Survival in Auschwitz*; also read Eakin, "Referential Aesthetic" [Carmen]

>>recommended reading: Rothberg and Druker, "Primo Levi" [Carmen]

Th 31  Continued discussion of *Survival in Auschwitz* (as necessary) Spiegelman, *Maus I*; also read Iadonisi, "Bleeding History" [Carmen]

February

T 5  *Maus I* continued; *Maus II*; also read Eakin, "Eye and I" [Carmen]
Th 7  *Maus II*; Szpilman, *The Pianist*

T 12  *The Pianist*; also read McAdams and Adler, "Autobiographical Memory" [Carmen]
   >>recommended reading: Eakin, "Living Autobiographically" [Carmen]

Th 14  Discussion of Polanski's cinematic adaptation of *The Pianist* (be sure to view the movie before class); read Brockmeier, "Autobiographical Time" [Carmen]; **FIRST ESSAY** due on Carmen by 11:59 p.m.

**Part III: Life Narratives about Other Transformative Experiences**

T 19  Explore the following illness blogs: Caroline's Breast Cancer Blog; The Wife of a Schizophrenic; 65 Red Roses (about Eva Markvoort's [1984-2010] experiences with Cystic Fibrosis); also, identify one other relevant illness blog and come to class prepared to discuss it in light of the concerns of our course

Th 21  Small, *Stitches*; also read Christer-Hydén, "Medicine and Narrative" [Carmen]

T 26  *Stitches*; Herman, "Narrative Worldmaking" [Carmen]

Th 28  Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

March
T 5  *The Year of Magical Thinking*; also read Luckhurst, "Reflections on Magical Thinking" [Carmen]

Th 7  *The Year of Magical Thinking* (continued as necessary); also explore the following veterans' life narratives: Dennis D. Adams; Heather Johnson Brott; Max (and Kimberly) Voelz

Spring Break

T 19  Bechdel, *Fun Home*; also read Chute, "Comics Form and Narrating Lives" [Carmen]; Gutenberg, "Coming-out Story" [Carmen]

Th 21  *Fun Home*; also explore these videorecorded coming-out stories and come to class prepared to discuss how 2-3 of the stories can be put into dialogue with Bechdel's text; **ONE-PAGE PROSPECTUS FOR FINAL PROJECTS** due on Carmen by 11:59 p.m.

T 26  *Into the Wild*; also read Zipfel, "Non-fiction Novel" [Carmen]; interview with Jon Krakauer [online]

Th 28  *Into the Wild*; discussion of Sean Penn's cinematic adaptation of Into the Wild (be sure to view the movie before class); also read, Scott, "Review of *Into the Wild*" [Carmen]
   **SECOND READING JOURNAL** due Saturday, March 30, by 11:59 p.m.

**Part IV: Experiments with Auto/biography**

April
T 2  Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*; also read Barros, "Getting Modern" [Carmen]

Th 4  *Alice B. Toklas*

T 9  Woolf, *Flush*; Herman, "Modernist Life Narratives and Nonhuman Lives" [Carmen]
Th 11  Woolf, *Flush*

T 16  Coetzee, *Summertime*; also read Farred, "Autobiography" [Carmen]

Th 18  *Summertime*; review; FINAL PROJECTS due on Carmen by 11:59 p.m.

Final exam: format and other specifics to be announced