

LT 177 Narrative Non-Fiction

Bard College Berlin Fall 2020

Dr. Fatin Abbas

Course Times: Tues. 5.30 pm – 7 pm (IN CLASS; location TBD)
& Every Thurs. 5.30 pm – 7 pm (ONLINE via Zoom link)

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Office hours: By appointment



Robert Frank, New York, circa 1950

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will close-read classic works of narrative non-fiction with an eye towards understanding a form of creative non-fiction that is driven by what can be termed “narrative storytelling.” This genre of writing raises compelling questions about the relationship between fact and fiction, as well as the ways in which “truth” is constituted through remembering and re-telling. Through deep analysis of a range of narrative non-fiction, including memoir, historical narrative, narrative essay, narrative journalism, biography and autobiography, we will address questions such as: what is narrative non-fiction, and how does it overlap with or diverge from other genres of writing? How do works of narrative non-fiction constitute “truth” through the act of writing? What do these works suggest

about the line between fact and fiction? Can such a line in fact be defined? Course materials will also consider non-fiction narrative beyond conventional literary writing, including documentary film, oral non-fiction and graphic non-fiction. Readings will include excerpts from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Barack Obama's *Dreams From My Father*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, among others.

COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS AND ACCOMODATIONS

To protect everyone's health in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, our sessions will be held partly in person and partly online. We will meet in person, in class, every Tuesday between 5.30 pm and 7 pm. Our Thursday meetings will be held online also between 5.30 pm and 7 pm, via Zoom link (you will receive instructions from me at the beginning of the semester about our online meetings).

Furthermore, during our Tuesday meetings on campus, precautionary measures will be strictly adhered to in our in-class sessions (masks must be worn during in-class sessions and distance requirements adhered to). Those who are unable to join class at the start because of COVID-19-related travel issues, or who may have to be absent for a period of time during the semester due to quarantine requirements or other COVID-19 issues, will be given instructions for alternative arrangements to complete readings and assignments electronically. Should we be required to move meetings entirely online at any point in the semester due to a deterioration in the public health situation, we will move all of our meetings to the Zoom app. Should you have any issues with access to computers or internet, please let me know at the beginning of the semester.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation

You are required to attend all scheduled sessions for the course. This not only means being physically present, but also actively engaging in the discussion around the assigned readings and materials. Before arriving in class, make sure you have thoroughly read and thought through materials and noted down questions and comments to bring to class. Your attendance and participation add up to 35% of your final grade; more than one missed session will significantly (as in adversely) affect your final grade.

Readings

All readings will be uploaded electronically to our classroom Google drive, access to which you will be given at the beginning of the semester.

Assignments

You will have four assignments for the course: 3 close reading assignments (10% each, adding up to 30% of your final grade), and a final paper (35%). You will receive hand-out instructions for each assignment once the course commences.

Grade Breakdown and Final Deadlines

Class participation: 35%

Close reading assignment 1 (instructions will be handed out in class): 10% (29th Sept)

Close reading assignment 2 (instructions will be handed out in class): 10% (27th Oct)

Close reading assignment 3 (instructions will be handed out in class): 10% (24th Nov)

Final paper (8-10 pages): 35% (18th December)

IMPORTANT NOTE: Late submission of your assignments will result in a lower grade. An assignment that is submitted one day (24 hours) late will be downgraded by one full grade. There will be a drop by one full grade for each further 24 hour delay. If you foresee that you will not be able to hand in an assignment on time for a valid reason, it is crucial that you contact me, *in advance*, to discuss.

Academic Integrity and policy on plagiarism

Students are expected to adhere to “the highest standards of [academic] integrity,” as outlined in The Bard College Berlin Student Handbook. Acts of academic misconduct and/or plagiarism will not be tolerated. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section III Academic Misconduct.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introduction: What is narrative non-fiction?

- *In class* Tues, 1st Sept: Introduction to the course
- *Online* Thurs, 3rd Sept: What is narrative non-fiction? Class exercise.

Week 2: Non-fiction controversies: Truth or lies?

- *In class*, Tues, 8th Sept: Nick Flynn, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (2004) (excerpt).
- *Online*: Thurs, 10th Sept: James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) (excerpt)

Week 3: The essay: Narrative form?

- *In class* Tues, 15th Sept: Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals” (c. 1580).
- *Online* Thurs, 17th Sept: Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (1964).
 - Zadie Smith, “Fences: A Brexit Diary” (2016).

Week 4: Writing crime

- *In class* Tues, 22nd Sept: Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1965) (excerpt).
- *Online* Thurs, 24th Sept: Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (cont’d).

Week 5: Writing race I

- *In class* Tues, 29th Sept: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1865) (excerpt).
 - Close reading assignment 1 (due Tues, 29th Sept).
- *Online* Thurs, 1st Oct: James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (1955).

Week 6: Writing race II

- *In class* Tues, 6th Oct: Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, Barack Obama (orig publ. 1995; repr. 2004) (excerpt).
- *Online* Thurs, 8th Oct: Ta-nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” (*The Atlantic* 2014).

Week 7: Writing Gender

- *In class* Tues, 13th Oct: Fatima Mernissi: *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Childhood* (1994) (excerpt).
- *Online* Thurs, 15th Oct: Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2015) (excerpt).

Week 8: Oct 19-23 FALL BREAK

Week 9: Writing Environment

- *In class* 27th Oct: Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) (excerpt).
 - Close reading assignment 2 (due Tues, 27th Oct).
- *Online* 29th Oct: Ken Saro-wiwa, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) (excerpt).

Week 10: Genres of Non-fiction: Graphic non-fiction

- *In class* Tues, 3rd Nov: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: Story of a Childhood* (2000) (excerpt).
- *Online*, Thurs, 5th Nov: Satrapi, *Persepolis: Story of a Childhood* (cont’d).

Week 11: Genres of Non-fiction: Oral non-fiction

- *In class* Tues, 10th Nov: Produced by Brian Reed and Julie Snyder, *S-Town* (2017).
- *Online* Thurs, 12th Nov: *S-Town* (cont’d).

Week 12: Genres of Non-fiction: Non-fiction film

- *In class*: Tues, 17th Nov: Dir. Leon Gast, *When We Were Kings* (1996).
- *Online*: Thurs, 19th Nov: Dir. Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man* (2005).

Week 13: Genres of Non-fiction: Documentary photography

- *In class* Tues 24th Nov: Select photography of Robert Frank, Teju Cole, Anna Boyzias.
 - Close reading assignment 3 (due Tues, 24th Nov).

- *Online* Thurs 26th Nov: Famous photographs: selected.

Week 14: Writing Non-fiction

- *In class* Tues 1st Dec: Guest visit TBD
- *Online* Thurs 3rd Dec: Asynchronous assignment TBD

Week 15: Wrap-up week

- *In class* Tues 8th Dec: Final papers—work in class.
- *Online* Thurs 10th Dec: Wrap-up

Week 16: TBD

- *In class* Tues 15th Dec and Thurs 17th Dec: This week's two sessions will be used in case of a need to re-schedule any sessions.

*This syllabus may be subject to revision