

COML 0022 601 (2025)

Wed. 5:15pm-8:15pm

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Study of a Theme: Life Writing

Course Description

The subject of the course is life writing and its genres of autobiography, autofiction, memoir, the diary, and online diaries. Genre theory frames the discussions that focus upon time perspective, the construction of self, issues of truth and fiction and of literary representation of experience, and the relation between private writing and public reading. Our examination of these genres follows their literary historical paths, in their social contexts. It traces the transformation of religious confessions of men to secular autobiographies, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and their expansion to autobiographical writing of marginalized women as Sally Morgan's hybrid text *My Place*. The study of the memoir follows the genre from its medieval traces to modern memoirs, their political utilization, and the influences of market shifts. For autofiction we shall examine Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, compared to her memoir *Aftermath*. In the history of the diary the analysis focuses on the role of the early canonical diary, as Samuel Pepys's diary, and its literary function in subsequent diary writings by women and men in times of war and peace, concluding with online diaries. The students will visit the rare book collection and examine diary manuscripts from different historical periods. They will also watch a video about the changes that occur in autobiographical manuscripts as they are edited and published.

The course assignments will consist of 1) weekly short writing assignments related to the readings. Students will post their responses and all written assignments on the Canvas forums. 2) Analysis of texts listed in the following reading list of autobiographies, memoirs, autofiction and diaries. Each student will be responsible for presenting one of the texts according to schedule. You are encouraged to use power point. 3) In the last couple of classes, you will share your own creative online diary/blog, 4) A final paper of 15-20 pages long. The writing process of the paper will be divided into two dated assignments: abstract or plan and the completed paper.

There will be no exams.

READING-LIST OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, MEMOIRS, AUTOFICTION and DIARIES:

Autobiographies

1) *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, online:

<https://proxy.library.upenn.edu:7976/lib/upenn-ebooks/detail.action?docID=992930>

There are 12 volumes 1765-1769 which were published from 1782-1789. We will analyze a selection.

2) The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (covers 1771-1790) online:

Project Gutenberg EBOOK- Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>

3) Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Online:

<https://books.google.com/books?id=1RwEAAAAYAAJ&dq=Incidents%20in%20the%20Life%20of%20a%20Slave%20Girl&pg=PR4#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Memoirs

4) Sally Morgan, *My Place*. Fremantle Arts Center Press: Western Australia, 1987

5) Rachel Cusk, *AFTERMATH*, On Marriage and Separation. Faber & Faber (2012). **Amazon**

Read Book reviews:

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2012/08/rachel-cusks-divorce-memoir-aftermath-reviewed.html>

<http://www.theomnivore.com/camilla-long-on-aftermath-by-rachel-cusk/>

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/rachel-cusk/aftermath-marriage-separation/>

<https://bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation/>

<https://www.bookforum.com/print/1903/rachel-cusk-s-aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation-10039>

Autofiction

- 6) Rachel Cusk, *Outline*. Picador Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (2014). **Amazon**
- 7) Annie Ernaux, *The Years*. Trans. Alison L. Strayer, (2017).

Diaries

- 8) Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Eds. Robert Latham and William Mathews, University of California Press, Berkley (1970):
- 9) Dawson, Sarah Morgan, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*. On line
http://www.bookrix.com/book.php?bookID=librarian_1256644958.1516859531&page=17&preview=&MaxW=1680&tm=1256645393&zoom=1
- 10) Chaim Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony, the Warsaw Diary of Chaim Kaplan*. Indiana University Press, 1999.
- 11) Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning, Girl Blog from Iraq*.

I suggest getting items 4, 5, 6,10 ahead of time. Other items are online or in Van Pelt library. Kaplan (10) and both of Cusk's books (5 and 6) are also in the library, not digitized. If unavailable, try interlibrary loan or Amazon.

WEEK 1 (First week of classes)—JANUARY 22, 2025 – INTRODUCTION

- 1) Introduction of each other and the course.
- 2) Discussion of all assignments of the course.
- 3) Presenting to students the list of autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries.
- 4) Q & A
- 5) A Canvas tour:
 - a) Go to syllabus
 - b) Go over 2-3 weeks, review readings, writing and listening assignments, where to post, peer comments, where?
 - c) Links for further questions and the online team. My email: benamos@upenn.edu
 - d) Q&A.
- 6) Final paper: Select an autobiography, memoir novel or a diary, different from those (to be) studied in class, to analyze in your paper. Discuss your choice with me and once approved, start to analyze. Include in the analysis. Support all your arguments with appropriate quotes from the text. Use your class readings and outside readings. Compare this text to others you have read.

Your paper must contain some form of **close analysis** of its primary source materials, from which it must cite **directly** in the form of quotations.

- You must use **critical terms** accurately and in ways that support your argument.
- You must incorporate references in the form of **direct** quotations from **at least four** secondary sources related in some way to your topic.
- You must document **all** your sources using **MLA or Chicago** style, in the form of footnotes.
- Write with the aim of being understood. Use clear **topic sentences** and **transitions** in your paragraphs. **Proofread** carefully to catch grammatical/syntactical problems and typos.

Required reading and listening for next week:

I-Listen: Listen to my lecture 1 ‘what is Autobiography’

II- Read Text:

Rousseau’s confessions:

1) *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, online:

<https://proxy.library.upenn.edu:7976/lib/upenn-ebooks/detail.action?docID=992930>

There are 12 volumes 1765-1769 which were published from 1782-1789. We will analyze a selection. Please read: Introduction and books: I, VI, VII.

[If you cannot get the text through this link, go to UPenn Franklin catalog and seek in the catalog under author Rousseau Jean-Jacques.]

For comparison to Saint Augustin’s confessions 4th century: Just skim through it to get an idea about the difference of the two most famous autobiographical confessions in the canon:

https://books.google.com/books?id=_wusCvC4yOcC&pg=PR17#v=onepage&q&f=false

III- Conceptual articles

1) James Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction.” In: Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen,

Eds. *The Routledge Autobiography Studies Reader*. Routledge, (2016): 5-14. **On Canvas**

2) George Misch, “Conception and Origin of Autobiography” in the Routledge Reader, (2016): 15-23. **On Canvas**

WEEK 2 – JANUARY 29, 2025–WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

About genre. Autobiographies of famous men

Going over your responses and discussion of readings.

Reading together parts from Rousseau’s *Confessions*:

[Download Jean-Jacques Rousseau Quotes.docx \(23.2 KB\)](#)

Required reading and watching for next week

I-Watch: to a linked four short audios (John Pollack on Franklin)

II- Read the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (covers 1771-1790) online:

Project Gutenberg EBOOK- Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. Read Introduction and parts: I, II, III, IX, XI, XIII, XIV, XVIII. (They are short chapters):

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>

III-Conceptual articles

- 1) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Autobiographical Truth” in *Reading Autobiography*. University of Minnesota Press, (2001): 15-18; 22-30 **on Canvas**
- 2) George Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” in *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton University Press, (1980): 28-48. See in reserve library uploads **On Canvas**
- 3) Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*. University of Minnesota Press, (1989):
Required: pages 3-30; Suggested: pages 119-137. **Online through library.**
On Canvas

WEEK 3 – FEBRUARY 5 , 2025- AUTOBIOGRAPHY – CONTINUED

Presentation of Franklin's autobiography.
Discussion of the readings and your writing assignments.

Readings for next week:

I-Read Text

Harriet Ann Jacobs' autobiography: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. See **link on Canvas**

II-Conceptual articles

- 1) Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. IU Press, 1993. Pages: 1-23; 34-52. **On Canvas**
- 2) Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*. Cornell University Press (1999): Pages: 43-98. **Online via library.**

WEEK 4 – FEBRUARY 12, 2025

Presentation of the text of Jacob's autobiography.
Discussing the readings and your writing assignments.

Readings and listening for next week (We start with the memoir)

I- Listen to my lecture on the memoir. On Canvas.

II- Text

Sally Morgan, *My Place*. Fremantle Arts Center Press: Western Australia, 1987.
Amazon

III- Conceptual Readings

- 1) Julie Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity” in *Genre*, 36 (Fall/Winter 2004): 305-326—**on Canvas**.
- 2) Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*. (2010): 27-30 (on memory and trauma), **book online and on Canvas**.
- 3) G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir, an Introduction*, Oxford University Press (2012): 3-53; 169-183. Online in library: <https://academic-oup-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/book/12076> **Amazone**.

WEEK 5 – FEBRUARY 19, 2025

Presentation of Sally Morgan’s memoir

Discussion of the readings and assignments.

Reading and watching for next week

I-Text:

Rachel Cusk, *AFTERMATH, On Marriage and Separation*. Faber & Faber (2012). **Amazon**.

II- Read Book reviews:

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2012/08/rachel-cusks-divorce-memoir-aftermath-reviewed.html>

<http://www.theomnivore.com/camilla-long-on-aftermath-by-rachel-cusk/>

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/rachel-cusk/aftermath-marriage-separation/>

<https://bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation/>

<https://www.bookforum.com/print/1903/rachel-cusk-s-aftermath-on-marriage-and-separation-10039>

and

Watch her interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGg_6BGIHuM ;

III- Conceptual Readings:

Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir*. Oxford University Press (2017): 1-7; 8-32 **on Canvas**

WEEK 6 – FEBRUARY 26, 2025

Presentation of Cusk's *Aftermath*

Discussion of the readings and your writings.

Readings and watching for next week:

I- Text

Outline Rachel Cusk, *Outline*. Picador Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (2014). **Amazon**

II- Interviews:

1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b08bwoCSSFY>

2)

https://www.google.com/search?q=Rachel+Cusk+outline%2C+interviews&rlz=1C1CHBD_enUS856US856&oq=Rachel+Cusk+outline%2C+interviews&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQABiiBDIHCAIQABiiBDIHCAMQABiiBNIBCTEwMTEyajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:96865de0,vid:KA-NVBdYmBM

III- Conceptual Reading

The Autofictional, Approaches, Affordances, Forms. Effe, Alexandra and Lawlor, Hannie, eds. (2022). pp. 1-18, 21-40, 185-204, 267-286. **Online access in library.**) How do the interviews with Rachel Cusk embellish our understanding of her writing?

WEEK 7 – MARCH 5, 2025

Presentation of Cusk's *Outline*

Discussion of the readings and your assignments

Reading for next class (March 19)

I – Text

Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, (2017) **Online access via the library**

II- Conceptual Reading:

Radical Realism, Autofictional Narratives, and the Reinvention of the Novel. Fiona J. Doloughan. (2023). pp. 1-40, 125-156. **Online access through the library.**

SPRING BREAK

WEEK 8 – MARCH 19, 2025

Presentation of *The Years* and discussion

Discussion of your papers

For Next Week

I- Listen to my linked audio lecture on diary.

II- Diary text

Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Eds. Robert Latham and William Mathews, University of California Press, Berkley (1970): Read: Vol. 1 (1660): Introduction up to page xcvi, pp. 1-35, 256-279; Vol. 9 (1669): 422-433, 462-504, 540-565. Also read from the Ely Lord Edition pp. 150-162 (1665 the plague), 184-190 (1666 London fire), 282-290 (1668 Deb). **All are on Canvas.**

All the diary's volume from 1660-1669—9 volumes are in Van Pelt library. However, they are not online.

III- Conceptual Readings

1) Philippe Lejeune, *ON DIARY*. Eds. J. Popkin and J. Rak, University of Hawaii Press (2009): 147-210; **Book available in the library online.**

Continue to work on your drafts of the final paper and bibliography. At least 80% of the bibliography must be of actual books and articles. These may be read online, when available.

Post: Nothing.

WEEK 9 – MARCH 26, 2025

Presentation of Pepys's diary.

Discussions

Readings for next week

Get a hold of: *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition*. English translation. Eds. David Barnouw and Gerrold Van Der Stroom. Amsterdam: Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, 2003. For your perusal to get an idea about this critical edition. **Van Pelt Library on reserve.**

1) Philippe Lejeune, “Autogenesis: Genetic Studies of Autobiographical Texts”, **and** “How Anne Frank Wrote the Diary of Anne Frank” In *On Diary* (2009): 213-266. **On Canvas** [For next week].

Recommended: Desirée Henderson, *How to Read a Diary, Critical Contexts and Interpretive Strategies for 21st-Century Readers*. Routledge (2019). **Online in Van Pelt.** This little book will be very helpful for your understanding of the genre. Go through it and read the parts that interest you.

WEEK 10 – APRIL 2, 2025

Visit the rare books collection-diary manuscripts.

After the visit we will watch together the video on editing and publishing diaries.

Upload John Pollack’s 4 videos “Diaries, Editions, and Editorial Process” Unpublished

Required reading for next week:

I- Diary

Dawson, Sarah Morgan, *A Confederate Girl’s Diary*. **Online link**

II- Conceptual Readings

1) Bunkers, Suzanne “Midwestern Diaries and Journals: What Women were (not) saying in the Late 1800’s.” **On Canvas.**

2) Jennifer Sinor, “Reading the Ordinary Diary”, *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2002): 123-149 **on Canvas.**

WEEK 11 – APRIL 9, 2025

Presentation of Dawson, Sarah Morgan's diary

Discussion

Reading for next week:

I- DIARY

Chaim Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony, the Warsaw Diary of Chaim Kaplan*. Indiana University Press, 1999.

II- Conceptual Readings

- 1) Batsheva Ben-Amos, "On Holocaust Diaries" in *The Diary*, (2020): 364-382. **An eBook in Van Pelt Library.**
- 2) Leena Kurvet-Kaosaar, "Estonian Women's Deportation Diaries" in *The Diary*, (2020): 383-396. **An eBook in Van Pelt Library.**

WEEK 12 – APRIL 16, 2025

Presentation of Kaplan's diary

Discussion

Required reading for next week:

I- Online Diary

Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning, Girl's Blog from Iraq*. (2005). **Online access via the library.**

II- Article

- 1) Laurie McNeill, "Teaching an Old Genre New Tricks: The Diary on the Internet" *Biography*, 26 (2003): 24-47, **Online through Van Pelt**
- 2) Kylie Cardell, "Read My Lips: Genre, Rhetoric, and the Baghdad Diaries of Nuha al-Radi." *a/b: Autobiography Studies*. 27.2 (2012): 316-337 **on Canvas.**

WEEK 13 – APRIL 23, 2025

-We will start students' presentations and discussion of all diaries/blogs online.

Share your screen and walk through your presented materials.

Completed presentations will be posted at the end of the class.

The presentations will continue the class after next.

-The scheduled student's presentation of *Baghdad Burning, Girl's Blog from Iraq*

Readings assignment for next week:

- 1) Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern, "Online Lives 2.0: Introduction" in *Biography*, 38.2 (2015): 1-33 **Oline through Van Pelt**
- 2) Madeleine Sorapure, "Autobiography Scholarship 2.0: Understanding New Forms of Life Writing" *Biography* 38.2 (2015): 267-272 **on Canvas.**
- 3) Kylie Cardell, "From Puritans to Fitbit, Self-Improvement, Self-Tracking, and How to Keep a Diary" in *The Diary*, (2020): 399-410. **An eBook in Van Pelt Library.**
- 4) Jill Walker Rettberg, "Online Diaries and Blogs." in *The Diary*, (2020): 411-424. **An eBook in Van Pelt Library.**

WEEK 14 – APRIL 30, 2025

We will complete the creative online students' presentations

And discuss the readings and your responses.