

# TRUE LIVES: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACTS & ARTIFACTS

Spring 2016  
Tues/Thurs, 11:30 to 12:45 p.m.  
Haag 309



*Dr. Jane Greer*

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Welcome to English 123--True Lives: Autobiographical Acts and Artifacts! In our class, we will be reading and analyzing a variety of life writing forms, including diaries, scrapbooks, blogs, autobiographies, and memoirs, both published and unpublished. You will also get to try your hand at composing your own "true" life story in a format you choose and develop your skills as a researcher investigating the lives of other individuals who have let written texts as a record of their lives.

These reading and writing activities will position the members of the class to think critically about life writing in various cultural, historical, and social contexts, and examine autobiography as a form of self-expression, as an articulation of personal and social values, as a public art, and as a way to study human experience in different contexts. Why do people write the stories of their lives in texts like diaries, scrapbooks, blogs, memoirs, and autobiographies? Can we "accurately describe" our lives? Is it possible to tell a "full tale"? And how should readers take up autobiographical texts? What do they reveal and what do they obscure?

Our course is also designated as a EUREka (Experiences in Undergraduate Research) course. EUREka courses offer 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup> students get involved in the research projects with faculty mentors and to share the results of their research with audiences beyond the classroom. Such undergraduate research experiences are designated as "high impact" practices because successful college alumni often point to such as opportunities as the most significant of their undergraduate careers. We'll talk more about this exciting dimension of our course in class.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2000. Print  
 Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Trans. B.M. Mooyaart-Doubleday. New York: Doubleday, 1967. Print.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Beautiful Struggle: A Memoir*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008. Print.

Koppel, Lily. *The Red Leather Diary*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.

Articles available on Blackboard Web Site. (Please print and annotate any assigned readings and bring them to class.)

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

(Also known as “assignments”)

Composing Your Own “True” Life Story: Over the first half (roughly) of the semester, you will have the opportunity to compose your own “true” life story, or at least a part of it. You will choose the genre in which you choose to compose (e.g., audio-essay, scrapbook, diary, print essay, zine, etc.) as well as determine the audience and purpose of your project. The final “true” life story you produce will be worth **20%** of your grade in our class.

To ensure that you get off to a great start with your “true” life story, you will compose a prospectus that defines your project, its significance, and lays out your plans for accomplishing your work. Your prospectus will be worth **10%** of your final grade.

You’ll receive more detailed information about these assignments in class. Due dates are on the attached course schedule.

### Researching the Lives of Others:

Over the second half (roughly) of the semester, you will have the opportunity to conduct research on the autobiographical project of another human being. We will be spending time in the Kenneth J. LaBudde Special Collections Department at Miller Nichols Library, and you’ll get to select a text from their holdings to study. The collections are amazing--dairies, scrapbooks, travel journals, letters, etc. While you may share the details of your subject’s life with your readers, your research project will need to focus on a detailed analysis of the “true story” she/he authored. Your research project will also need to connect the object of your study with the readings and discussions we’ve had in class. Your final research project will be worth **25%** of your grade in our class.

To ensure that you get off to a great start with your research project you will compose a prospectus that defines your project, its significance, and lays out your plans for accomplishing your work. Your prospectus will be worth **10%** of your final grade.

You’ll receive more detailed information about these assignments in class. Due dates are on the attached course schedule.

### Take Home Midterm and Final:

You will have an opportunity to reflect on “true lives” and some of the critical questions that life writing raises (e.g., identity, community, embodiment, fact/fiction, place and space, difference,

ethics, social change) for your take-home midterm exam, which will be worth **10%** of your final grade. Your final take-home exam, which will be a revision of your mid-term exam, will be worth **10%** of your final grade as well.

Reading Folder: In class, we will often do informal writing activities and other exercises to extend our analyses of the texts we have read. These activities may take the form of quizzes, group activities, or graphic organizers. I will collect the products of these class activities and keep a reading folder for each one of you. Your folder will be evaluated cumulatively, meaning that a single poor performance will not unduly affect your grade. Instead, I will be looking for consistent and conscientious effort on your part as you consider seriously issues involving autobiographical acts and artifacts. Your reading folder will be worth **15%** of your final grade.

Here's a handy chart that visually summarizes the semester's learning opportunities and how each opportunity contributes to your final grade.

Assignment	Your Grade	Percentage of Final Grade
Your Own "True" Life Story		20
Prospectus		10
Researching Autobiographical Artifacts		25
Prospectus		10
Take Home Midterm Exam		10
Take Home Final Exam		10
Reading Folder		15
		100%

A Special Note about Life Writing and our Classroom Community: Many popular memoirs, blogs, online discussion forums, and other autobiographical artifacts bring forward the very difficult, very personal experiences of the author(s). Please be aware that this class in no way requires you to share information about yourself, your circle of family and friends that you would prefer to keep private. You get to choose what you share in our classroom, keeping in mind that your colleagues will be responding to your work.

Undergraduate Research@UMKC: While formal learning opportunities in classrooms and assignments are essential to your learning experiences as college students, my sincerest hope for all of you is that you'll be able to participate in undergraduate research at UMKC, even beyond our EUREKA class. Through summer grants (SUROP), grants during the academic year (SEARCH), other programs, you can develop relationships with faculty mentors, learn research methods, make an original contribution to knowledge, and disseminate your important ideas to larger audiences. Due dates for various undergraduate research opportunities are on the course calendar, and you can find out more about undergraduate research at UMKC at <http://www.umkc.edu/searchsite/>. And you can stay up-to-date about opportunities to get involved with undergraduate research via [Undergraduate Research-UMKC](#)

## COURSE POLICIES

Attendance: The success of this class depends a great deal on your interests, insights, and questions; therefore, you should be prepared to participate productively in daily class discussion and activities. That means you should have read *and* thought about each assignment before coming to class.

Because class discussion, small group work, and class activities will be important components of your educational experience, your regular attendance and participation are required in order for you to be successful. For every absence over three your grade may be lowered; if you miss class six times, I will advise you to drop the course rather than receive a failing grade.

Since arriving late to class is distracting to your classmates (and to me), you are expected to arrive on time. Three late arrivals will count as an absence.

Electronic Devices in the Classroom: Laptop computers, tablets, and smartphones can be powerful learning tools, and there are many times when it is appropriate to use them in the classroom. These same tools, though, can also be powerfully distracting. Indeed, neuroscientists have demonstrated that human beings are not truly capable of “multitasking.” Instead, we toggle between cognitive tasks, and the more we toggle, the less proficiently we perform any of the tasks at hand. Psychologists and media scholars have also begun raising concerns about “shallow thinking” as digital media continue to engage our attention in short bits and bytes. Finally, recent studies have demonstrated that using electronic devices in class is like second-hand smoke--a screen with facebook posts scrolling past or the newsfeed from CNN distracts not just the person making a decision to check out of our shared work and conversation. Everyone who can see the screen is distracted, and their learning experiences are diminished. For these reasons, we all need to exercise self-control and leave our portable electronics out of reach during the time that we are together, unless we are using them for purposes explicitly related to our shared work.

If I have to ask you to turn off a personal electronic device during class, you will be counted as officially absent for that day. If I have to ask you to turn off a personal electronic device during class more than three times during the semester, I'll advise you to drop our class rather than receive a failing grade. If you have to ask me to turn off a personal electronic device during class, your lowest grade of the semester will be raised to an A.

If circumstances (e.g., family illness) necessitate that you have access to your cell phone during class, please let me know. You can use the vibrate function on your phone and step out of class to take any urgent calls.

Please note that audio/video recording is not permitted in our classroom. We will be discussing interesting, challenging issues, and everyone needs to feel comfortable contributing their ideas. Recording devices can stifle the free exchange of ideas.

Due Dates: Due dates are listed on the course schedule, and your final paper and commonplace book will be due during final exam week. Course work may not be submitted electronically unless specified; you will need to bring a hard copy of your work to class. No late work will be accepted. If unusual circumstances will keep you from completing an assignment on time, please speak to me about it immediately. When requested in advance, extensions are readily granted.

Blackboard Website: A copy of this syllabus, several required readings, and assignments are archived at <http://blackboard.umkc.edu>. You can access these course materials using your UMKC username and password. Important course information and reminders (e.g., class cancellations, schedule changes, etc.) will also be posted as “Announcements” on our blackboard site. If you are unfamiliar with Blackboard as a learning tool, you may wish to complete the tutorial available at <http://umkc.edu/blackboard/students/>.

And about that “Gradebook” feature on Bb: I’ve found that Blackboard’s gradebook feature seems to have been designed for large classes where students take numerically scored quizzes and exams. It functions like a giant spreadsheet that spits out final grades when a professor pushes a button. But it’s pretty unwieldy for classes, like ours, where assignments are evaluated more holistically (e.g., A, B, C). You’ll receive lots of feedback from me on your performance this semester as well as grades on all your assignments. I urge you to keep track of your individual grades, and if at any time, you have questions about your grade, please be in contact with me.

Paper Format: All papers must be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins. Electronic submissions will not be accepted, unless otherwise specified.

The Writing Studio: UMKC’s Writing Studio is located in the Student Success Center and studio consultants are also available at Miller Nichol’s Library. Writing consultants can help you develop ideas for your papers, articulate your thesis, organize your material, and hone your grammar skills. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the writing lab’s *free* services. You can schedule an appointment by calling 816.235.1146. You can find more information about the Writing Studio at <http://cas.umkc.edu/writingcenter/>

Access for Students with Disabilities: To obtain disability-related accommodations and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the Offices of Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD) as soon as possible. The OSSD phone number is 816.235.5696. The OSSD Web site is: <http://www.umkc.edu/disability/>

Life Coach: The College of Arts and Sciences funds a “life coach” to support students. You can contact the life coach at (816)235-1446 or you can make contact via e-mail: [aslifecoach@umkc.edu](mailto:aslifecoach@umkc.edu)

Plagiarism: Intentionally using someone’s words (or ideas) as your own is a serious offense in the university, which can result in reprimands, suspensions, and expulsions. If you have questions about proper citation and documentation of any sources you are using, please see me.

You can find more details about the university’s policies regarding academic misconduct and plagiarism here: <http://www.umkc.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity-dishonesty-and-plagiarism.pdf>

Grade Appeals: The university’s policy on grade appeals can be located here: [http://www.umkc.edu/catalog/Procedure\\_for\\_Appeal\\_of\\_Grades.html](http://www.umkc.edu/catalog/Procedure_for_Appeal_of_Grades.html)

Student Code of Conduct: All students at UMKC are expected to abide by the Student Code of Conduct, which sets forth expectations and guidelines for appropriate behavior within a productive and intellectually engaging academic community. You can review the Code of Conduct and other policies, at <http://cas.umkc.edu/cpr/>.

### CLASS SCHEDULE

Tues Jan 19 Introductions. Narrating Lives/Living Narratives

#### **Composing “True” Lives**

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Thurs Jan 21 DUE: David Sedaris, “Carolina” (pgs. 3-15); “Genetic Engineering” (pgs. 32-38); “The Youth in Asia” (pgs. 69-82); “Today’s Special” (pgs. 120-124); “Nutcracker.com” (pgs. 142-149)

IN CLASS: Kinds of Selves

Tues Jan 26 IN CLASS: The Genres of Life Writing

*Composing Your Own “True” Life will be assigned*

Thurs Jan 28 DUE: David Sedaris, “Now We are Five” (Available at Bb); Interview with David Sedaris by Jenna McKee (Available at Bb); Jinna Moore, “Sister in a Glass House” (Available at Bb); Obituary for Tiffany Sedaris from *Somerville Times* (Available at Bb); Michael Knoblach, Column from *Somerville Times* (Available at Bb).

IN CLASS: The Ethics of Writing about Self and Others

Tues Feb 2 DUE: Anne Frank, pgs. 1-20  
Francine Prose, “The Life” (Available at Bb)

IN CLASS: Beginnings

Thurs Feb 4 DUE: Anne Frank, pgs. 20-127

IN CLASS: Crafting Characters, Describing Places

Tues Feb 9 DUE: *Prospectus for your “True” Life project*

IN CLASS: Workshop

- Thurs Feb 11 DUE: Anne Frank, pgs. 127-268  
IN CLASS: Endings
- Tues Feb 16 DUE: *1<sup>st</sup> "Best Effort" Draft of your "True" Life Story*  
IN CLASS: Peer Response
- Thurs Feb 18 DUE: Francine Prose, "Teaching the Diary" and "Bard College 2007"  
(Available at Bb)  
IN CLASS: The After Life; *Take-Home Midterm Exam will be Assigned*
- Tues Feb 23 DUE: Ta-Nehisi Coates, chpts. 1 & 2 (pgs. 1-63)  
IN CLASS: Memoirs and Memories, Maps and Family Trees
- Thurs Feb 25 DUE: *2<sup>nd</sup> "Best Effort" Draft of your "True" Life Story*  
IN CLASS: Writing Workshop
- Tues Mar 1 DUE: Ta-Nehisi Coates, chpts. 3-5 (pgs. 64-150)  
IN CLASS: Individuals in/as Communities
- Thurs Mar 3 DUE: *Take-Home Midterm Exam*  
IN CLASS: Reflections and Observations on Autobiographical Acts & Artifacts
- Tues Mar 8 DUE: Ta-Nehisi Coates, chpts. 6-8 (pgs. 151-223)  
IN CLASS: Acknowledgments
- Thurs Mar 10 DUE: Final Draft of Your Own "True" Life Project  
In Class: Celebration  
  
(Note: Friday, March 11, is the last day to withdraw without assessment.)

- Tues Mar 15 DUE: Lily Koppel, *The Red Leather Diary*, Forward to pg. 22
- Researching Autobiographical Artifacts Project will be available at Bb.
- No Class Meeting--On Line Class Activity to be completed by 12:45 p.m.
- Thurs Mar 17 DUE: Lily Koppel, *The Red Leather Diary*, pgs. 23-151
- IN CLASS: Encountering Autobiographical Artifacts
- Special Guest Speaker: Stuart Hinds, Director of the LaBudde Special Collections Department at MNL  
 \*\*\*Meet on 3<sup>th</sup> floor of MNL & NO FOOD OR DRINK today!!!!
- SUROP--Summer Research Opportunity Applications due by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, March 18***
- Tues Mar 22 DUE: Lily Koppel, *The Red Leather Diary*, pgs. 151-277
- IN CLASS: Writing Lives, Writing Places. Visual and Verbal Arguments
- Thurs Mar 24 DUE: Lily Koppel, *The Red Leather Diary*, pgs. 277-320
- IN CLASS: Project Workshop
- MNL--Special Collections  
 \*\*\*Meet on 3<sup>th</sup> floor of MNL & NO FOOD OR DRINK today!!!!

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**Spring Break!**  
**No Classes—March 29 to April 1**

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***Abstracts for the Symposium of Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship due by 5:00 pm on Monday, April 4!***

- Tues Apr 5 DUE: *Prospectus for Research Project*. Please bring hard copy to class and also e-mail a copy (MS Word) to Dr. Greer [greerj@umkc.edu](mailto:greerj@umkc.edu) before class begins.
- IN CLASS: Writing/Research Workshop



- Thurs Apr 7           IN CLASS: Consultations with Stuart Hinds and MNL staff  
 \*\*\*Meet on 3<sup>th</sup> floor of MNL & NO FOOD OR DRINK today!!!!
- Tues Apr 12           DUE: Barry Rohan, "My Grandfather's Trunk" (Available at Bb) and  
 Elizabeth (Betsy) Birmingham, "I See Dead People': Archive, Crypt, and  
 an Argument for the Researcher's Sixth Sense" (Available at Bb)
- IN CLASS: Ourselves in/with Others
- Thurs Apr 14           DUE: 1<sup>st</sup> "Best Effort" Draft of Research Project
- IN CLASS: Writing/Research Workshop
- (Note: Friday, April 15, is the last day to withdraw with  
 assessment—W or WF.)
- Tues Apr 19           IN CLASS: Revision Workshop
- Thurs Apr 21           No Class Meeting. Instead please attend the . . .
- Symposium of Undergraduate Research & Creative Scholarship!!***  
***2:00 to 7:00 in Pierson (ASSC)***
- Tues Apr 26           DUE: Re-Read Your Midterm Exam
- IN CLASS: Reflections and Revisions on the Art(s) of Life Writing.  
 Take-Home Final Exam will be assigned.
- Thurs Apr 28           DUE: 2<sup>nd</sup> "Best Effort" Draft of Research Project  
 IN CLASS: Workshop
- Tues May 3            **Writing Workshop & Course Evaluations**
- Thurs May 5            No class--reading day! Individual Conferences as Requested

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Final Celebration of semester and submission of your research project  
 & take-home final exam at time of our officially scheduled final exam  
 (Tuesday, May 10, from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.)

The exciting, challenging processes of intellectual inquiry cannot and should not be reduced to simplistic outcomes, and the results of asking authentic, worthwhile questions should lead us all to new places that we cannot currently imagine. Here, though, are some of the ways in which you might track the components of your learning experience this semester.

**BY THE END OF THE SEMESTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO:**

- Read and respond thoughtfully to autobiographical texts.
- Examine and explain the contexts (historical, intellectual, political, economic, religious, and cultural) that have shaped autobiographical texts.
- Think critically about the issues raised by autobiographical writing, including relating their efforts to your own contemporary concerns as a user of language.
- Participate in developing and maintaining a supportive collaborative learning environment.
- Develop, manage, and complete an extended research project about an autobiographical text that allows you to participate in ongoing scholarly conversations and share your work beyond the classroom.