

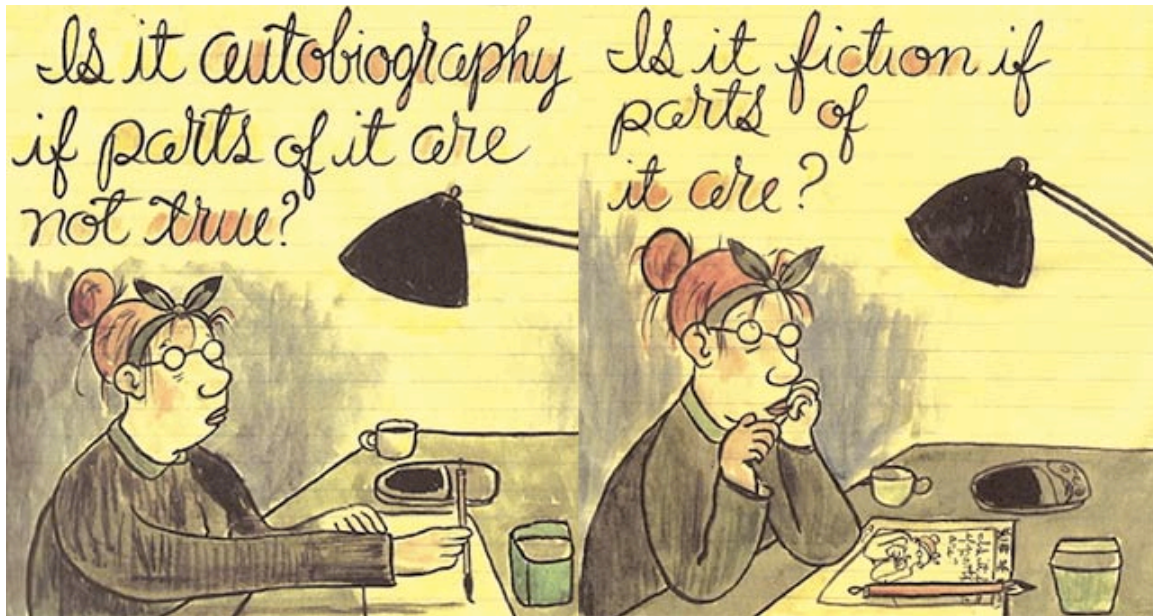
The Lives of Autobiography

Instructor: Abby Seeskin

Class Meeting: MW 4:40-5:55, Perkins Link 079

Office Hours: MW 2:30-4:30, Von der Heyden Pavilion

Email: s.abigail.seeskin@duke.edu



From Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*

Course Overview

Autobiography occupies a weird position in literary studies. Many scholars contend that autobiography and biography do not belong in literary study: autobiographies, they contend, comprise a part of *history* distinct from literature. Yet, there is no denying that autobiographies can use many of the same literary techniques that any novel might. Like any fictional text, autobiographies can use figurative language, character development, and plot arcs. Like fiction, autobiographies can paint an imagined world. Like fiction, autobiography is forced to make creative choices—no matter how apparent these choices might be. The cartoonist Lynda Barry has wondered if it's even worthwhile to separate autobiography from its assuredly literary counterpart in fiction. As she writes in the cartoon reprinted above, "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?"

Given the proliferation of social media and the increased number of platforms available to storytellers, there has never been a more interesting time to study autobiography. In this course, we will investigate the many lives of autobiographical media: from traditional print books, to blogs, to YouTube videos, and more. We will consider how worthwhile it is to

distinguish autobiography from the literary, what autobiography can teach us about the craft of writing, and what makes a life story so captivating. In addition to these concerns, students will learn to apply the techniques of literary study—in particular, close reading—to a range of cultural objects.

Course Materials

The following books can be found at the campus bookstore:

Antin, Mary: *The Promised Land* (1912)
Eggers, Dave: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000)
Kaling, Mindy: *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* (2011)
Forney, Ellen: *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, & Me* (2012)
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques: *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782)
Wright, Richard: *Black Boy* (1945)

The following texts/links I have made available on Sakai under “Resources”:

Adams, Timothy Dow: “Confessions of an Autobiographical Scholar; Or, You can’t Handle the Truthiness” (2009)
Brosh, Allie: [Hyperbole and a Half](#) (blog)
Cover, Rob: “Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking” (2014)
De Man, Paul: “Autobiography as De-Facement” (1979)
DiBattista, Maria and Emily O. Wittman: Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* (2014)
Foucault, Michel: selection from *The History of Sexuality* (1976)
Helms, Gabrielle: “Reality TV Has Spoken: Auto/Biography Matters” (2005)
Irby, Samantha: [Bitches Gotta Eat](#) (blog)
James, Marlon: “From Jamaica to Minnesota to Myself” (2015)
Lawson, Jenny: [The Bloggess](#) (blog)
Lee, Katja: “Not Just Ghost Stories: Alternate Practices for Reading Coauthored Celebrity Memoirs” (2014)
Lejeune, Phillipe: “Autobiography and New Communication Tools” (2014)
Maguire, Emma: “Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles” (2015)
Marbles, Jenna: [Jenna Marbles Blog](#)
Marbles, Jenna: [Facebook](#)
Marbles, Jenna: “[How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking](#)” (2010) (video)
Marbles, Jenna: [Instagram](#)
Marbles, Jenna: [Twitter](#)
Nelson, Deborah: Panel: Comics and Autobiography with Phoebe Glockner, Justin Green, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Carol Tyler (2012)
Scott, Joan W.: “Storytelling” (2011)

Sedaris, David: "[Papa Was Not A Rolling Stone](#)" (1998) (radio, from *This American Life*)
Vaisey, Rebekah: [The Monti Video Series](#) (2015) (video)

Course Blog

Each student will be required to contribute weekly to our ongoing conversations by writing on our course forums on Sakai. Consider these posts as an informal opportunity to process the course readings, raise questions about the material, and draw connections not just among the readings on the syllabus, but with other materials you may have encountered in other classes (or even on your own, elsewhere)! These posts are also an opportunity for you as students to direct the conversation for our class.

In every blog post, you should write to make **one connection** between the material for our Wednesday class and **anything else**. This can include anything we've encountered previously in the class, but can also include something you've learned in another class, or something you saw on TV, or something you've read on an article online, or something another student wrote. At the end of your blog post, you should also pose to the class one question derived from the inquiry you raise in your posting for the week. Blog posts are due at midnight on Tuesday, and should address the reading due on Wednesday. Each student is responsible for posting **eight times** over the course of the semester. It is the student's responsibility to keep track of how often they post.

Each student, regardless of whether they write a post for that week or not, is responsible for reading all of the posts in advance of our class meeting. Each week, **one or two students** will be responsible for presenting some of the major questions and themes raised to kick off our daily conversation. Each student will lead the discussion once. Students will sign up for that date early in the semester.

The posts constitute a portion of your final grade, but I will not be grading your posts week by week. Rather, I will evaluate the blogs holistically on the basis of completion and thoughtfulness. Blog posts should be written in complete sentences and paragraphs, but can maintain a more informal tone. Aim for about 300 words, give or take. Use parenthetical citations when referring directly to the text. The goal of the blog posts is in part to build a collaborative learning community in our class, so **please be kind to each other as you reply**. However, you should always feel free to respectfully disagree. When you do so, be sure to explain clearly why and how you disagree with your classmates.

Writing Projects

Over the course of the semester, you will write two analytical papers, each 4-5 pages. Your first paper will be revised after peer workshopping. The second paper will not undergo a formal revision process. For both of these papers, I will hand out prompts for the paper well in

advance of their due dates. You are welcome to explore topics other than what I provide on the prompt. You are also welcome to flesh out a blog post that you wrote.

Your final project will be a creative project in which you produce an autobiographical project using any form explored in our class. I encourage creativity, and thus am very open to what your project might look like. Each student will write a prospectus for their project and meet with me to discuss their idea. Each project will be accompanied by a 2-3 page artist statement in which each student addresses their creative choices.

All papers should be double-spaced, titled, and numbered. Write in a size 12 serif font; use 1-inch margins.

Submitting Writing Projects

This course is a green course. All papers can be submitted via “Assignments” on Sakai by 5 pm on their due date unless otherwise stated. Please submit your paper as a WORD DOC, **not** as PDF.

If you are in need of a extension for any reason, it is always best to get in touch with me as soon as you know that you need one. I am happy to grant extensions (with the exception of the paper due on Feb. 26). Because I grant extensions, I expect all papers to be submitted in a timely fashion to Sakai by either their deadline or our agreed upon due date. Otherwise, papers will lose 1/3 of a letter grade for each 24-hour period that they are late (A→A-; A-→B+).

Attendance and Participation

Plan to attend every class meeting. However, I do understand that even with the best of intentions, you may come down sick or find yourself in a no-win scheduling conflict. In such cases, please send me a short, explanatory email. It need not be immensely detailed (for example, I do not need to know the symptoms of your illness).

Because this is a seminar course, I expect every student to participate in every class. Participation does not necessarily mean frequent vocal participation throughout the entire class session: this narrow definition of participation rewards both extroverted personalities and oral processers while punishing introverted personalities and internal processers. Introverts and internal processers: this does not mean that you are off the hook. I will be looking for engaged body language and active participation in small group activity and online forums. I expect all students to engage thoughtfully with their peers.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy

I do not permit personal laptop use in the classroom unless otherwise specified. (There are some days when laptops will actually be useful to our class, in which case I will give you advanced notice to bring your laptop.) Cell phones must be silent and stored away during the duration of our class period.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Please use citations; please include quoted text in quotation marks. While there are several systems for documenting sources, in our class, you will learn and employ MLA-style citation. Recall the Duke Community Standard: 1. I will not lie, cheat, or steal in my academic endeavors, nor will I accept the action of those who do; 2. I will conduct myself responsibly and honorably in all my activities as a Duke student.

Please note that I am also a student at Duke, and am bound by the same code that you are. Therefore, if I suspect anyone of plagiarism, I am *obligated* to report it to the Duke University Office of Student Conduct. Plagiarism can result in failure of the course and/or suspension from Duke University. Please. Don't. Plagiarize. It is heartbreaking for all parties involved when it happens. In the event that a deadline proves to be too overwhelming, **please get in touch with me** (see my late policy under "submitting writing projects").

Grading

Your final grade will be determined by the following components:

Participation:	15%
Posts on Sakai:	15%
-Post content	10%
-Discussion leadership	5%
Paper 1:	20%
-Workshop	5%
-Final Product	15%
Paper 2:	20%
Final Project:	30%
-Prospectus	5%
-Artist Statement	5%
-Project	20%

Students with Disabilities

Students who may need special accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Student Disability Access Office (<http://www.access.duke.edu/sutdents/index.php>) as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion.

Schedule

Week 1:	W, Jan. 13	Introduction
Week 2:	W, Jan. 20	DiBattista and Wittman, Introduction to <i>The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography</i> De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement" Adams, "Confessions of an Autobiographical Scholar"
Week 3:	M, Jan. 25	Rousseau, <i>Reveries of the Solitary Walker</i> (Walks 1-5)
	W, Jan. 27	Rousseau, <i>Reveries of the Solitary Walker</i> (Walks 6-10)
Week 4:	M, Feb. 1	Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i> (chapters 1-5)
	W, Feb. 3	Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i> (chapters 6-10)
Week 5:	M, Feb. 8	Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i> (chapters 11-15)
	W, Feb. 10	Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i> (chapters 16-end)
Week 6:	M, Feb. 15	Wright, <i>Black Boy</i> (chapters 1-3)
	W, Feb. 17	Wright, <i>Black Boy</i> (chapters 4-9)
Week 7:	M, Feb. 22	Wright, <i>Black Boy</i> (chapters 10-14)
	W, Feb. 24	Wright, <i>Black Boy</i> (chapters 15-end)
	F, Feb. 26	Paper 1 Due
Week 8:	M, Feb. 29	Workshop Papers
	W, Mar. 2	James, "From Jamaica to Minnesota to Myself" Foucault, <i>The History of Sexuality</i> (selection)
Week 9:	M, Mar. 7	Forney, <i>Marbles</i> (chapter 1-chapter 4)

	W, Mar. 9	Forney, <i>Marbles</i> (chapter 5-end) Panel: Comics and Autobiography
	F, Mar. 11	Revision 1 Due
NO CLASS SPRING BREAK		
Week 10:	M, Mar. 21	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work</i> (Rules-chapter 2)
	W, Mar. 23	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work</i> (chapter 3-chapter 6) Helms, "Reality TV Has Spoken"
Week 11:	M, Mar. 28	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work</i> (chapter 7-chapter 8)
	W, Mar. 30	Eggers, <i>A Heartbreaking Work</i> (chapter 9-end)
	F, Apr. 1	Paper 2 Due
Week 12:	M, Apr. 4	Lejeune, "Autobiography and New Communication Tools" Brosh, <i>Hyperbole and a Half</i> Irby, <i>Bitches Gotta Eat</i> Lawson, <i>The Bloggess</i>
	W, Apr. 6	Cover, "Becoming and Belonging" Marbles, "How to trick people..." Maguire, "Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood..." Marbles, Instagram account Marbles, Twitter account Marbles, Jenna Marbles Blog
Week 13:	M, Apr. 11	Scott, "Storytelling" Vaisey, from the Monti Sedaris, "Papa Was Not a Rolling Stone"
	W, Apr. 13	Lee, "Not Just Ghost Stories"
Week 14:	M, Apr. 18	Prospectus Due Kaling, <i>Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?</i> (page 1-page 123)
	W, Apr. 20	Kaling, <i>Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?</i> (page 124-end)
Week 15:	M, Apr. 25	Presentations on final projects

W, Apr. 27 Class wrap-up

Final Project due during exam period: Saturday, May 7, 12:00 NOON