

Women of the World - Fall 2013

English 203, Section 1

**Read no history--nothing but biography,
for that is life without theory.
— Benjamin Disraeli**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

While billions of women have passed through the portals of this planet, there have been a rare group which have rocked everything we thought we knew about the gender. Their defiance—of tradition, their role in society, and indeed of history itself—have *made* history. We celebrate them this semester by reading their biographies. These books present a selection of creatures who are a mix of wild woman, warrior and wanton; by turns they're creative, fearless, hilarious, pathetic, ingenious, maddening and some would claim mad. Their fame covers a spectrum of arts and politics with a surprising amount of crossover between the two.

Since this is a craft class, we will be looking beyond the factual and study the techniques each writer uses to make the subject come to life...and discuss how well he or she succeeds. We'll be analyzing aspects such as the writers' relationship to the subject; their methods for creating character, setting and narrative; the overall structure of the work and how the story unfolds. We'll also study the skeletal framework beneath the story, and discuss how the authors unearthed the material they present, noting that a writer of biography may wear the hat of a scholar, but sometimes she needs to add the trench coat of the private detective to her wardrobe.

We also have the benefit of visiting guest lecturers this semester who are the authors of biographies themselves. They'll be sharing with us some of their secrets for success, the type of hard-won knowledge which only comes from years of experience in the trenches.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Lola Montez, *A Life*; Bruce Seymour
Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette; Judith Thurman
Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo; Hayden Herrera
Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life; Caroline Moorehead
Evita: The Real Life of Eva Peron; Nicholas Fraser & Marysa Navarro
Oriana Fallaci: The Woman and the Myth; Santo Arico
Champion of Choice: The Life and Legacy of Women's Advocate Nafis Sadik; Cathleen Miller

**Anyone who has the temerity to write about Jane Austen is aware of [two] facts: first, that of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness; second, that there are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult to the chastity of their aunts.
— Virginia Woolf**

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 203

The Student Learning Objectives [SLO] of the Department of English and Comparative Literature: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. Articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

ASSIGNMENTS

Here are the major assignments required for this course:

1. For each book students will turn in a two-page critique that examines the author's use of the techniques listed under "Course Objectives." You may also include your personal reaction to the text.
2. Students will each give a 10-15 minute presentation, working in teams to cover each book: one student will do a critical presentation outlining the author's use of the techniques described under Course Description; a second student will provide background information on the author, particularly his or her professional career and ideally the process of writing our selected work.
4. Our major semester project will be a five to ten-page critical essay in which students choose a theme such as "how authors handle the issue of time" or "the representations of women in biography" and analyze works from this class.

**Every life is inexplicable, I kept telling myself.
No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many
details are given, the essential thing resists telling.
To say that so and so was born here and went there,
that he did this and did that, that he married this woman and
had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left
behind these books or this battle or that bridge –
none of that tells us very much.
— Paul Auster**

PAPER FORMAT

All material handed in should follow the same guidelines as those for submitting professional manuscripts:

- typewritten, double-spaced, black ink with copy dark enough to be easily read
- one-inch margins on all sides
- text on one side of the paper only
- 12-point type in a highly-legible font, preferably Times New Roman or Courier New
- your name and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet
- title centered on the first page
- pages numbers included
- pages stapled or paper clipped together

Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

CLASS ETIQUETTE

Students are welcome to disagree with one another during class discussion; however, all our dialogue must be conducted with respect for each individual's opinions and work. In addition, the following practices are forbidden while class is in session: eating and the use of laptops or cell phones.

OFFICE HOURS

Please feel free to visit me during my office hours; it's a good idea to make an appointment, otherwise I work on a first-come, first-served basis. Email is meant for brief questions and I encourage you to use it sparingly; this is not an online course. If you are absent, please contact one of your classmates to find out what you missed.

ATTENDANCE

Required, because English 203 depends on your participation each day. You are allowed one unexcused absence before your grade can be dropped, and students who come in after roll call will be considered absent. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than one class, please contact me as soon as possible.

**Always live your life with your biography in mind.
— Marisha Pessi**

GRADE REQUIREMENTS

Grades are meant to reflect—quite simply—the quality of a student's work. Final grades will be calculated thus:

- 20% two-page critiques (on the number completed)
- 20% presentations (on the quality and delivery of information)
- 20% class participation (on the contributions you bring to class discussion)
- 40% final critical paper (on its originality, insightfulness, and the quality of the prose)

There are no examinations for this class.

DEPARTMENTAL GRADING POLICY

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU [Catalog](#) ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure. In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

**Biography lends to death a new terror.
— Oscar Wilde**