Colloquium in Cultural and Intellectual History
56:512:503:01 and 56:606:671:01

Biography as History
Location: CS-203

Professor Margaret Marsh
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Office Hours: My regular office hours are Monday 3:00-4:30 and Wednesday 10:00noon. However, I realize that most graduate students will not be able to make those hours, so I am also available by appointment after class, immediately before class, and at other times as well.

Course Description:

This readings course focuses on biography as an instrument of historical analysis, exploring the ways in which biography serves – and also complicates – the study of history. Among the topics to be considered are how successfully (or not) biographers manage to recreate a particular historical era; research challenges and research methods in biography; and the extent to which historical periods and processes can be understood through the lens of biographical studies. We will begin with brief readings that explore historians' use of biography as a vehicle for writing history, and then move quickly into the biographies themselves.

Requirements:

1. Students are expected to come to every class well-prepared to discuss the readings.

2. Students will write one paper, due no later than May 13, although it can be handed in as early as May 6, if a student wishes to do so. To write this paper, students will use only the readings for this course, including those that we are not discussing but which are posted on our SAKAI site. The paper will be between 12-16 pages, with proper referencing.

The intellectual goal of this assignment is to have students grapple individually with the questions we'll be dealing with as a group. What unites these biographies? What divides them? How do these works of biography – collectively and individually – illuminate the study of history? Or do they? You may decide in the end that some do but some don’t, and if that is the case, you will explain why. Your paper will include all of the works we’ve read and discussed in addition to the assigned works posted on SAKAI that we
have not discussed. It will incorporate the following: a discussion of the multiple goals of historical biography as manifested in these works; how each of the works is distinctive as well as how all of them are connected (if that is what you think, but if you don’t think they are connected, then explain why); and the advantages and disadvantages, as you have come to view them, of attempting to interpret history through biography.

The assignment will also include an oral component, in that our last class will be devoted to your views, as they have developed over the course of the semester, on these matters. For this class, all students will come prepared to deliver, and justify, their intellectual judgments.

Grading:

Throughout the semester, you will be reading these works thoughtfully and analytically. You’ll be expected to approach these works critically, with discernment and open-mindedness. Student grades will be based on class participation (its quality as well as regularity) and the final paper.

Required Books:

Note: All the books are in paperback and available from the bookstore or online, and most if not all are available for Kindle or other e-readers.

David Herbert Donald, Lincoln. Simon and Schuster, 1996.


Required Articles for Specific Class Discussions: (all posted on the class SAKAI site):

Jay Parini, "Biography Can Escape the Tyranny of Facts"

David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography: Introduction"
Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?"

Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History"

**Other Required Articles** (You'll be reading these for your paper, and all posted on the class SAKAI site):

Barbara Taylor, "Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History"

Robin Fleming, "Writing Biography at the Edge of History"

Kate Brown, "A Place in Biography for Oneself"

**Course Schedule:**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/28</td>
<td>No Reading: Introduction to Course</td>
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| 2/4   | Jay Parini, "Biography Can Escape the Tyranny of Facts"  
David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography: Introduction"  
(both on Sakai site)  
*Lincoln*, Chapters 1-10 |
| 2/11  | Finish *Lincoln*. Discussion of *Lincoln* |
| 2/18  | *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life*. Discussion of this book. |
We will conclude any remaining discussion of *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* and begin discussion of *The Chief*. |
| 3/18  | No Class. Spring Break |
| 4/1   | *FDR*, finish. Discussion of *FDR* |
| 4/8   | *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, Parts I - III |


4/29 Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?"
Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History"
(Both on Sakai site)

5/6 No readings. Final Discussion.

5/6 – 5/13 PAPERS must be uploaded to the class SAKAI site no later than 5 pm on 5/13. If for some reason there is a problem on that date, you may email them to mmmarsh@camden.rutgers.edu or drop them off at my office by that date and time.