

Department of English  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

**ENGE3280 – Writing a Life Between Languages**  
Date and Venue TBC

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Office hours: Mondays 11AM-1PM and by appointment

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**Description:**

This course aims to introduce students to the study and practice of life writing across its varied forms, including autobiography, the personal essay, the graphic memoir, biographical poetry, and autofiction. We'll focus specifically on a group of writers who explore the experience of moving between multiple languages, thereby raising fascinating questions about the relationship between language and identity. Together, we'll reflect on these questions and on the similarities and differences between these writers' narratives and students' own experiences. Ultimately, the course will aim to teach students how to approach, analyze and theorize about autobiographical narratives. Students will be given the opportunity to develop their analytical skills in essay responses to the course texts. They will also be given the opportunity to develop their narrative skills in their own life writing, using the course texts as models. Both forms of written exercise are designed to extend, as well as test, students' understanding of life writing as a genre.

**Learning outcomes:**

- Upon successful completion of the course, you will be able to:
- Recognize and describe life writing's genre conventions and the key questions in contemporary life writing criticism.
  - Articulate the affordances and limitations of different media and modes of life writing, ranging from long-form prose to graphic novels to digital poetry.
  - Develop and present literary arguments based in close readings of life writing texts, both in oral presentations and in written essays.
  - Deploy narrative skills in your own life writing, drawing on our course texts as models.

**Learning activities:**

The learning activities in this course will take a variety of forms. During class meetings, we'll discuss works of life writing in several modes and media. We'll read passages closely together, aiming to develop your close reading skills, and we'll relate our insights to each text's historical and cultural

context. You will also have opportunities to develop your own thinking in individual writing tasks, both critical and creative. Tutorials will be interactive, offering you the chance to practice your close reading skills collaboratively with a small group of peers, and to present your insights to each other in an oral presentation. Out-of-class activities include reading and taking careful notes on assigned primary texts and literary criticism in preparation for lecture and tutorial; working with other tutorial members to compose and structure your group presentation; and developing both your analysis skills in a formal essay, and your storytelling skills in an autobiographical narrative drawn from your own life.

**Key concepts:**

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Contents/fundamental concepts</b>
Life writing's genre history and conventions	<p>Historical and contemporary forms and media employed by autobiographical writers</p> <p>The relationship between truth and fiction in life writing</p> <p>The relationship between personal and collective identity and representation</p>
Key concerns of life writing criticism	<p>Memory and interpretation</p> <p>Authority and authenticity in the autobiographical "I"</p> <p>Writerly agency within familial and cultural context</p> <p>The ethics of representing one's own and others' lives</p> <p>Emplacement, temporality, and embodiment</p>
Narrative skills	<p>Pacing, plot, and characterization</p> <p>Scene and detail selection</p> <p>Developing a writer-reader relationship</p> <p>Navigating between languages</p>

**The following workload schedule per week may help you allocate your time this term:**

Lecture	Interactive tutorial	Reading	Writing	Preparing for assignments/ examinations/ tutorial activities
In class	In class	Out of class	Out of class	Out of class
2 hrs	1 hr	2 hrs	1 hr	2 hrs
M	M	M	M	M

All elements, both in and out of class, are mandatory.

## Assessment Scheme

Task nature	Description	Weight
<b>In-class Participation</b>	Because interpreting literature is a skill best practiced collaboratively with other interested, engaged readers, this course values active and curious engagement in all class discussions and writing activities, in both lecture and tutorials.	10%
<b>Tutorial Presentation: Close Reading</b>	Once in the semester during weeks 5-12, you'll offer a 10-15 minute group presentation in your tutorial, in which you develop and share a close reading of an excerpt of one primary text we have read together, without the use of secondary sources. Your presentation will include a 2-4 page handout. This assignment will assess your ability to build on the skills you have practiced in class, developing your own insights and structuring them argumentatively for an audience of your peers.	20%
<b>Autobiographical Narrative</b>	Midway through the term, you'll have the chance to explore and practice the techniques of life writing we've discussed as you compose a narrative drawing on your own life experience (roughly 3-4 pages or 900-1200 words). The medium and form is up to you. You'll accompany your narrative with a brief critical reflection explaining why you chose to approach the assignment the way you did; what primary texts you've drawn on as models and how; and what you've learned about life writing from practicing it yourself.	30%
<b>Final Essay</b>	You will apply what you have learned about analyzing and interpreting examples of life writing as you generate an extended argument (6-8 pages or 1800-2400 words) about one of our primary texts. Your argument should contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about your text; in order to do that, you'll need to consult and cite several secondary sources. Due in Reading Week after our last class meeting.	40%

### Required texts (subject to revision):

Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, Abrams ComicArts, 2017.

Grace M. Cho, *Tastes Like War*, The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2021.

All other texts will be provided via Blackboard or in-class handouts, including excerpts of life writing by Amy Tan, Craig Santos Perez, Paisley Rekdal, Marjorie Satrapi, Teju Cole, Eva Hoffman, Demitria Martínez, Grace Cho, Dunya Mikhail, Maxine Hong Kingston, Azar Nafisi and Karen Cheung.

## eLearning/Course Announcements:

We will be using Blackboard Learn as the eLearning platform in this course. Blackboard Learn will be used for a) dissemination of course materials such as readings, discussion questions, assignment prompts, and rubrics, b) supplementary class discussion, and c) d) course announcements.

You can access Blackboard Learn at: <https://elearn.cuhk.edu.hk/>

A demonstration of how to access Blackboard Learn to post and respond to announcements, download resources, and use the discussion forums will be given in the first lecture.

## Feedback for evaluation

In any community of writers, constructive feedback is key, and in this class it is very welcome. Students may raise questions or offer comments during workshop sessions, as well as via email or during individual office hours. Midway through the term, there will also be an opportunity to provide anonymous feedback via a Google survey.

At the end of the course, students will be asked to complete Course Evaluations for both the lectures and tutorials for the course. Both I and the department value this information highly, as it allows us to understand what we are doing well and how we can improve. We use your feedback to revise our teaching methods and course content.

## Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>. With each assignment, students will be required to submit a statement that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

### Statement:

I declare that the assignment here submitted is original except for source material explicitly acknowledged. I also acknowledge that I am aware of University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and of the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations, as contained in the website

<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student ID

## Grade descriptors

### Course Grade Descriptors:

Grade A / Excellent: Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study. The 'A' grade should be reserved for truly excellent work that exceeds the level expected for the majority of students and are expected to be achieved only by a small minority.

Grade A- / Very Good: Generally outstanding performance on ALMOST ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade B+ / Good (Plus): HIGH performance on all learning outcomes, OR HIGH performance on some learning outcomes which compensates WELL for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply WELL the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level WELL.

Grade B / Good: SUBSTANTIAL performance on all learning outcomes, OR SUBSTANTIAL performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a MORE COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade B- / Good (Minus): GOOD performance on all learning outcomes, OR GOOD performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade C+ / Adequate (Plus): VERY ADEQUATE performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a SOMEWHAT SUSTAINED manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C / Adequate: ADEQUATE performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C- / Adequate (Minus): SOMEWHAT ADEQUATE performance on A NUMBER OF learning outcomes. Demonstrates the ability to SOMEWHAT apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the BARE basic requirement at this level.

Grade D+ / Pass (Plus): BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on A FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade D / Pass: ALMOST BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on VERY FEW learning outcomes. Addresses the task inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in very few areas while responding very minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade F / Failure: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. Fails to address the task and likely does not understand what the task requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.