

EN 8553: Seminar: American Literature to the Civil War American Life Writing

Thursdays, 6:00-8:30 p.m.
Dr. Bonnie O'Neill



“The thing most like living one’s Life over again, seems to be a *Recollection* of that Life, and to make that Recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in Writing.”
—Benjamin Franklin

“There is no history, only biography.”
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Biography, autobiography, spiritual autobiography, journals, captivity narrative, slave narrative: in a culture obsessed with the individual, life writing is perhaps the quintessential literary genre. It is also extremely varied in its forms and purposes. In this seminar, we will read widely in early American biographical and autobiographical writings, considering questions of audience, purpose, and form. We will consider the cultural as well as personal uses of life writing for readers and writers, and we will investigate the tradition of American life writing as it develops from the era of Puritan self-analysis through the age of Barnumesque self-aggrandizement.

Readings may include the following works:

- Spiritual autobiographies, such as those of Thomas Hooker, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards
- Captivity narrative, such as those of Mary Rowlandson, John Williams, and Hannah Duston
- Diaries and Journals, such as those of Samuel Sewall, Sarah Kemble Knight, William Byrd, Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (selections)
- Samson Occom, *A Short Narrative of my Life*
- Elizabeth Ashbridge, *Some Account of the Early Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men* (selections)
- Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*
- Margaret Fuller, “Autobiographical Sketch”
- Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*
- P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*

