

Winter session 2020

Course: ENGL214Z “Reading and Writing Memoir”

Wesleyan University

Instructor: Jeanne Bonner

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Please note: readings and assignments will be due during winter break, prior to arriving on campus for Winter Session. Please visit the Winter Session website for the full syllabus – <http://www.wesleyan.edu/wintersession>

**“I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.”
(Henry David Thoreau)**

Short summary: In this class, we will read a variety of works from the beloved and bewitching nonfiction genre of memoir, paying close attention to structure, focus and flow. We will also write our own examples of memoir, which will be the primary assignments for the course and will become part of a portfolio that will be shared with the class.

Course description:

Memoir is the art of shaping one’s personal history. What makes this genre possible is the willingness to mine our most important human experiences in a way that’s astonishingly unique but also universal. And do not fear: Everyone’s life contains the seeds of memoir.

Yet, to be clear, memoir differs from autobiography; it’s not an orderly retelling of facts, nor is it an orderly retelling of *all* the facts. It is the necessary privileging of one set of events or one slice of an event over others. Memoir is a beguiling combination of disclosure and concealment – or at the very least, omission. Indeed, Annie Dillard tells us that unlike autobiography, memoir asks us what to put in as well as what to leave out. Also, where do you begin? Where is the beginning?

While the genre of memoir is joyfully accessible to most readers, that does not mean writing memoir is easy. We will explore how to select the most compelling details and scenes. Good memoir is true but it can read like fiction. Voice and tone are critical, and they help us answer this question: How do we enable readers to feel and experience the personal histories we want to pour into a work of memoir?

In this course, we will read memoirs that touch on daring pursuits, wartime deprivation and survival, alcoholism and toxic family relationships, and on-the-job adventures. We will master the art of close reading, and we will read as writers do. We will examine works of memoir with an eye toward identifying how the authors mastered the art of storytelling and sketching of the characters (yes there are characters, even though memoir is nonfiction). How did the writer translate lived experience into a piece of writing that is engaging while also personal?

But most importantly, we will practice writing memoir, compiling several examples into portfolios that will be shared with the class. This course will be part literature course, part

writing workshop. We will use a combination of paired portfolio exchange and all-hands workshopping.

We will use prompts in class to generate new writing, and through the major class assignments, we will generate three examples of memoir for our portfolio. We will also explore how we develop strategies to write regularly and keep writing regularly. To that end, we will be keeping a journal.

Last but not least, we will also talk at length about revision, one of our most prized writing tools.

Course objectives:

1. To read widely in the genre of memoir (and select samples of other genres)
2. To gain a more comprehensive working knowledge of the aspects, approaches and features of memoir writing
3. To write and revise a portfolio of three pieces of creative nonfiction

Requirements: Please read the assigned texts fully and deeply. Complete all of the assignments. Attend all classes. Submit and revise 3 works of memoir.

Class meetings

Our class will meet 9am - 11:30am and 1pm - 2:30pm on the following days:
January 7-10 (weekend off), Jan 14-17 (weekend off), & Jan 21-22

Reading list: there will be a set list of texts, stipulated at the beginning of the course, as well as secondary readings distributed throughout the course of the semester.

Course texts – see below for other reading assignments

Walden by Henry David Thoreau (1854)

West with the Night by Beryl Markham (1942)

The Periodic Table by Primo Levi (1975)

Liar's Club by Mary Karr (1995)

Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain (2000)

Plus:

Philip Lopate. *To Show and To Tell*

Assignments

First day assignment: on *Walden*

3 short pieces of memoir

One analytical paper on a memoir from the course (5-7 pages)

Course journal

More information on the First day assignment

You will read *Walden* before our class begins and on the first day, you will bring an analysis of one chapter/section of *Walden* that you think exemplifies the book and the aims of the author. You can (and should) use secondary sources; 4-5 pages.

Assessment: This is a seminar-style class, where students will do significant amounts of reading and come to class prepared to discuss the texts. You should come prepared to participate in discussion, having taken extensive notes on the assigned reading. We will be doing in-class writing each day, and will analyze readings with a view to both technique and ideas. Those who raise questions and initiate discussions will be particularly appreciated. As for how assignments are assessed, submit only work that's thoughtful and which is the result of research, contemplation and multiple drafts.

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Writing journal: Students will be asked to keep a short journal.

About the instructor: Jeanne Bonner is a writer, teacher and literary translator who has taught English literature and composition, and Italian literature and composition. She is the 2018 winner of the PEN Grant for the English Translation of Italian Literature for her translation-in-progress of Mariateresa Di Lascia's 1995 novel, *Passaggio in Ombra*. Her memoir and personal essays have been published by *The New York Times*, *Literary Hub*, *Catapult*, *CNN Travel* and *Ploughshares*. An essay she wrote was honorably mentioned in the 2019 Aetna Nonfiction Writing Contest. She's written widely on fiction from emerging and established Italian women writers. Jeanne studied Italian literature at Wesleyan University and has an MFA in Creative Writing from Bennington College and an MA in Italian Literary and Cultural Studies with a concentration in Literary Translation from the University of Connecticut.

Texts to purchase for this course

Walden by Henry David Thoreau
West with the Night by Beryl Markham
The Periodic Table by Primo Levi
Liar's Club by Mary Karr
Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain

Plus:

Philip Lopate. *To Show and To Tell*

Other Selected Course Readings (provided by instructor)

David Sedaris, "Journey into Night" (c/o *The New Yorker*)
Alfred Kazin, "Brownsville Kitchen"

Joan Didion, "John Wayne: A Love Story," among others from *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*
"9 Things I Learned about Nature on my Skateboard" (from the *Kenyon Review*)
SS: "Your Husband Is Cheating on Us," Jill McCorkle
Excerpts from Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*
Excerpts from Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia*
Poem: "Now" by Denis Johnson
Poem: "What the Living Do" by Marie Howe
Poem: "Aubade" by Philip Larkin

Tentative schedule

***Tues., Jan 7, 2020**

Walden

Due in class on the first day: An analysis of one chapter/section of *Walden*

In class: Alfred Kazin's "Brownsville Kitchen"

HW: Write/edit your 'Brownsville Kitchen' homage/attempt

Read Philip Lopate's "On the Necessity of Turning Yourself into a Character" and "Reflection and Retrospective"; begin thinking about what topics you'll explore in the three memoir assignments for the course – and take notes to share

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***Wed., Jan 8**

West with the Night

In-class workshopping: bring idea/abstract of first memoir assignment

Lopate excerpt

***Thu., Jan 9**

West with the Night

Share journal

Theme: 'I'd rather be...'

***Fri., Jan 10**

First memoir assignment due

Short reading day, including:

David Sedaris, "Journey into Night" (from *The New Yorker*)

Joan Didion, "John Wayne: A Love Story," among others from *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*

From Lopate text: "On the Ethics Of Writing About Others" and "On Writers' Journals"

***Tues., Jan 14**

The Periodic Table

In-class excerpt *If This is a Man* (Levi)

In-class workshopping: bring idea/abstract of analytical assignment

Wed., Jan 15

Share journal

In-class session on revision, followed by revision of first memoir piece

Second memoir assignment due

Thu., Jan 16

Liar's Club

Theme: Writing about the wounds that may still be 'infected'

Fri., Jan 17

Liar's Club

Analytical paper due

Tues., Jan 21

Kitchen Confidential

On memoir: disclosure, concealment and omission

Wed., Jan 22

Last day!

Kitchen Confidential

Wrap up discussions

Third memoir assignment due

Present work to class – ‘Winter Session Reading’