

Course: ENGL/WRCT214Z “Reading and Writing Memoir”

**Winter session 2021**

Wesleyan University

Instructor: Jeanne Bonner

Office Hours, Winter session: By appointment via Zoom

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

**Short summary:** In this intensive Winter session class, we will read a variety of short and long works from the beloved, bewitching nonfiction genre of memoir, paying close attention to how the authors parse the past – and which parts they parse – to convert memory into a lyrical essay that is at once personal and universal. We will also write our own examples of memoir, which will be the course’s primary assignments. Students will have daily short writing exercises every day in class so the course will be a writing immersion experience.

**Meeting times (tentative; subject to weather-related changes, etc)**

Jan 4-7 10 a.m. to 12noon, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. (No class Friday, Jan 8)

Jan 11-14 10 a.m. to 12noon, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. (No class Friday, Jan 15)

Jan 18-20 10 a.m. to 12 noon, 1:30 to 2:30 p.m.

**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 fast-paced, immersive course, 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.

Since this is a Winter session course, students will be immersed in reading and writing memoir, and can expect to write every day in class as well as often after class. We will use prompts in class to generate new writing, and through the major class assignments, we will generate two examples of memoir for our portfolio. We will also explore how we develop strategies to write regularly and keep writing regularly.

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 a portfolio of two pieces of creative nonfiction memoir, plus analytical works probing selected course readings

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

Course texts to purchase:

*The Periodic Table* by Primo Levi (1975)

*Brother I Am Dying* by Edwidge Danticat (1994)

*Kitchen Confidential* by Anthony Bourdain (2000)

*To Show and To Tell* by Philip Lopate

Other readings (provided by instructor)

Patricia Hampl, "Memory and Imagination"

James Baldwin, Selections from *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*

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

Alfred Kazin, "Brownsville Kitchen"

Jamaica Kincaid, excerpt from "A Small Place"

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (excerpts)

Assignments & How Grades Will be Assessed

First day assignment on *Walden* -- **(worth 20 percent of the final grade)**

Two short works of memoir -- **(worth 25 percent of the final grade each)**

One analytical paper on a memoir from the course (5-6 pages) -- **(worth 20 percent of the final grade)**

Class participation -- **(worth 10 percent of the final grade)**

## **First day assignment**

### **More information on the First day assignment**

You will read assigned chapters of *Walden* before our class begins (note, we will not read the whole book nor will we begin reading from the first chapter) and on the first day, you will have completed **three** short papers. The first paper (2-3 pages) will explain why you would recommend *Walden* for a college English curriculum while in the second paper (2-3 pages), you will argue against reading the book. You will use secondary sources. Lastly, you will write a one-page proposal for a “Walden project” that the book has inspired you to pursue (no obligation to complete the project, obligation only to map out a bold plan and the steps you would take to fulfill it, using *Walden* as your inspiration).

Please follow normal MLA guidelines: double space the paper, number your pages, include a bibliography, cite sources properly, etc. Also: Write your name on your paper!

## **Tentative class schedule**

### **(Subject to change, depending on weather and other factors)**

#### **Tues., Jan 4, 2020 – (Day 1)**

*Walden*

Due in class on the first day: Short papers on *Walden*

#### **Wed., Jan 5 – (Day 2)**

*Walden*

In-class Patricia Hampl’s “Memory and Imagination”

Read Philip Lopate’s “On the Necessity of Turning Yourself into a Character”; begin thinking about what topics you’ll explore in the two memoir assignments for the course – and take notes to share

#### **Wed., Jan 6 – (Day 3)**

James Baldwin readings

#### **Thu., Jan 7 – (Day 4)**

James Baldwin readings

#### **Fri., Jan 8 – (Day 5)**

First memoir assignment due

*The Periodic Table*

From Lopate text: “On the Ethics Of Writing About Others” and “On Writers’ Journals”

**Mon., Jan 11**

*The Periodic Table*

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

**Tues., Jan 12**

*Brother I Am Dying* by Edwidge Danticat

**Wed., Jan 13**

*Brother I Am Dying* by Edwidge Danticat

**Thu., Jan 14**

**Analytical paper due**

Short readings including, David Sedaris’s “Journey into Night,” selections from Lopate and Jamaica Kincaid

**Mon., Jan 18**

*Kitchen Confidential*

**On memoir: disclosure, concealment and omission**

In-class workshopping of draft for second memoir assignment

**Tues., Jan 19**

*Kitchen Confidential*

**Wed., Jan 20**

**Last day!**

Second memoir assignment due

**Present work to class – ‘Winter Session Reading’**