

## **English 580: The Study of Memoir as Literary Form Syllabus, Spring 2016**

“How is it possible to bring order out of memory? I should like to begin at the beginning, patiently, like a weaver at his loom. I should like to say, ‘This is the place to start; there can be no other.’” Beryl Markham

“In our family, as far as we are concerned, we were born and what happened before that is myth.” V.S. Pritchett

“I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well.” Henry David Thoreau

“. . . [S]ince such a Repetition is not to be expected, the Thing most like living one’s Life over again, seems to be a Recollection of that Life.” Benjamin Franklin

**Instructor: Dr. Doris Davis**

**Office: 221**

**Office Hours:** M 1:00-3:30; 5:00-6:00  
W 9:30-12:00  
TR 9:30-10:30; 2:30-4:00  
Other times by appointment

**Course Time: M 6:00-8:45**

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### **Course Description:**

This course provides a study of memoir as literary form, focusing on highly regarded, twentieth-century examples. Selected memoirs offer variety in literary structure and diversity in setting.

**Required texts:** *Memoir: An Introduction* by G. Thomas Couser and the memoirs listed on the syllabus.

### **Student Learner Outcomes:**

- Develop awareness of the types of memoir writing
- Articulate an informed response to the aesthetics of memoir through reading and analyzing highly regarded examples
- Indicate an understanding of the process of creating memoir by writing a chapter of memoir
- Develop an awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of memoir by reading and discussing examples of theoretical/critical writings on memoir

## Course Requirements

**Reading the texts** as outlined on the syllabus

**Reading the theoretical/critical handouts** as assigned

**Final examination** (take-home exam) over the required reading

**Preparing a paper and delivering a presentation** on a memoir (10 typed pages)

**Writing a short memoir** (5-10 typed pages)

**In-Class writing** (At the beginning of each class, you will write for 15-20 minutes on a question pertaining to that week's reading of memoir. If you come late, you will miss that opportunity and the credit for writing.)

**Class attendance.** (Your grade will reflect your participation in class)

## Final Grade

Grades will be determined based on the following:

Final exam	30%
Analytical paper	40%
Presentation	5%
Memoir writing	15%
In-class writings/participation	10%

**Disability Accommodations** Students with disabilities may request reasonable accommodations through the A&M Texarkana Disability Services Office by contacting Mr. Carl Greig in UC255A, or by calling 903-223-3062

## Academic Honesty Statement

Academic honesty is expected of students enrolled in this course. Cheating on examinations, unauthorized collaboration, falsification of research data, plagiarism, and copying or undocumented use of materials from any source constitute academic dishonesty, and may be grounds for a grade of "F" in the course and/or disciplinary action. The student is responsible for reading and understanding the University Policy on Academic Integrity.

Do not copy material from the internet or any other source without documentation. This act constitutes plagiarism. **Please be advised that a new regulation of the College of Arts & Sciences & Education requires that I report any academic dishonesty to the Dean.**

## Class Calendar

You should be ready to discuss (or write about) the text on the day it appears on the syllabus.

January 25                      Introduction to Class and *Growing Up* by Russell Baker  
Couser, "Introduction," pp. 3-14.

February 1                      *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard  
Couser, "What Memoir Is, and What It Is Not," pp. 15-32

February 8                      *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Kerr Conway  
Couser, "Memoir and Genre," pp. 33-53

February 15                      *A Walker in the City* by Alfred Kazin  
Couser, "Memoir's Forms," pp. 54-78

February 22	<i>West with the Night</i> by Beryl Markham Couser, "Memoir's Ethics," 79-107
February 29	<i>Speak, Memory</i> by Vladimir Nabokov, Chapters I-VI
March 7	<i>Speak Memory</i> continued, Chapters VII-XV
March 14	Spring Break
March 21	<i>Colored People: A Memoir</i> by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Couser, "Memoir's American Roots," pp. 108-139
March 28	<i>One Writer's Beginnings</i> by Eudora Welty & <i>Running in the Family</i> by Michael Ondaatje Couser, "Contemporary American Memoir," pp. 140-168
April 4	<i>Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight</i> by Alexandra Fuller Couser, "The Work of Memoir," pp. 169-183.
April 11	<i>The Glass Castle</i> by Jeanette Walls
April 18	<i>Angela's Ashes</i> by Frank McCourt
April 25	Class Presentations and paper due
May 2	Creative Memoir due
May 9	Take-home Final Exam

## **English 580: The Study of Memoir as Literary Form**

### **Instructions for Paper**

Write an analytical paper (10 pages) on an approved memoir. (See the list for possible choices. You do not have to choose one of these, but your choice must be approved.) Incorporate secondary sources wherever applicable. You should use analytical books as well as journal articles and book reviews. Use secondary sources directly related to the memoir you choose, but also incorporate some of the theory we read on autobiography/memoir. You may use other theoretical readings as well.

Include references to the following: the strengths of the text (and weaknesses if found) and the structure, theme(s) and unifying images of the memoir. Also, consider the type of memoir. Does it more nearly resemble an essay than a narrative? Is it a combination

of both? What devices generally found in fiction does the memoir employ, if any? Your introductory paragraph(s) will typically include much or all of this information.

As in any other essay about literature, you'll need a thesis—what is the overall point you are making in this analysis. And you'll use a critical approach or combination of approaches. Do not use headings in the paper. Provide continuity through transitional devices.

**Submit paper to Turnitin.com: password: eng580      Course ID is 11490572.**

**Instructions for the Presentation: 10-15 minutes maximum; provide an overview of the memoir and a description of your paper. You may use powerpoint, but if you do, put the presentation on a flash-drive. We need to be able to change presenters quickly. Prepare a one to two page handout for the class.**

#### **Instructions for writing creative memoir**

This assignment offers you the chance to write a short piece of memoir (5-10 pages). The type of memoir you write is your choice. It might be a single narrative with reflection; it might be based on a single theme pertinent to your life involving food, travel, a fear, a goal, a failure, an achievement, etc.; it might be several short narratives about one person. Feel free to be funny, poignant, and/or erudite. I hope you will use the techniques of dialogue and scene as your memoir permits. We will share portions of these in class. (This is meant to be an enjoyable assignment!)

#### **List of theoretical/critical texts that supplement your reading of memoir:**

**I will provide handouts from some of these.**

- *Autobiography* by Linda Anderson
- *The Business of Memory: the Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, edited by Charles Baxter
- *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* by Paul John Eakin
- *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography* by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson
- *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson
- *Writing the Memoir* by Judith Barrington
- *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser
- *Writing a Woman's Life* by Carolyn G. Heilbrun
- *Writing a Life* by Katherine Bomer
- *Memoir: An Introduction* by G. Thomas Couser
- *Memoir: A History* by Ben Yagoda

## **Ideas about Memoir Writing**

from *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser

Memory is often highly unreliable. It is subjective. The only truth a memoir writer can work with is what something was like for him or her.

There are themes memoirs have in common: (1) loneliness and (2) humor.

“Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. A memoir writer takes us back to a moment in his or her life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood, or that was framed by war or travel or some other exceptional event. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that’s not possible in autobiography. Memoir is a window into a life” (11).

“. . . [A] good memoir is also a work of history catching a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society” (12).

Excellent memoirs are often sensual in nature.

. . . “[The] writer of a memoir must become the editor of his or her own life, imposing a narrative pattern and an organizing idea on an unwieldy mass of half-remembered events” (13)

“The writer of any first-person work must decide two obvious questions: what to put in and what to leave out” (13). Annie Dillard

Good memoirs offer the interior life as well as the exterior.

“My advice to memoir writers is to fashion a text” (14). Annie Dillard