

"All autobiographies are lies." George Bernard Shaw

"I am a lie that always tells the truth." Jean Cocteau

ENGLISH 389R: The Memoir (INQ)

Spring 2011

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Office: Humanities Hall 105

Office hours: MW 10-2; individual meetings are by appt only

Required Texts

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Women's Indian Captivity Narratives

Kathy Dobie, *The Only Girl in the Car*

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*

Felicia Snoop Pearson, *Grace after Midnight*

Elie Wiesel, *Night*

Miscellaneous assigned readings

Film: *51 Birch Street*, *Questioning Faith*

Course Description & Structure

English 389R: The Memoir is an examination of the importance to contemporary American society of a vaguely-defined literary genre. Students will read classic and contemporary memoirs published between 1845 and 2007. This TPSL/INQ course meets one night each week for ten weeks at Metro State Prison, in addition to regular Monday afternoon classes on the Oxford campus. The twelve Oxford students share a collaborative classroom experience with twelve incarcerated women. All students complete the required course work. Lecture is minimal; small group discussion and collaboration is necessary to the successful exploration of the essential questions. Metro and Oxford students' contact is limited to two hours per week. In class, students are expected to sit next to a classmate from the partner institution. Small groups will always include equal numbers of Metro and Oxford students.

Objectives & Requirements

Students will read and discuss the assigned texts and in the process of discussion will collaborate to create a unified definition for the memoir genre. Class discussions will focus on the various types of memoir, and how the genre has evolved during the last two centuries, with primary emphasis on modern and contemporary memoirs. Students will analyze the function of the audience for each book. In addition to reading six memoirs, students will view and discuss two film memoirs. For each text, written or visual, the students will receive a set of assigned questions to be used as the basis for class discussion. Students will submit a written reflective analysis in response to each book. Each student will

complete her own nonfiction creative prose piece about a personal event or experience, of no-fewer than fifteen pages.

Essential Questions

Memoirs are hot sellers. In spite of its popularity, or perhaps because of it, the genre is very difficult to define. What makes a memoir “good” or important? Why are so many people eager to share the painful details of their lives? Does the memoirist have an obligation to his subjects and if so what is this obligation? How does one protect privacy and honor one’s own [and others’] dignity in the process of truth-telling? And what is truth, anyway? Must a memoir be factual? Are there certain experiences or relationships that trigger the desire to self-disclose? Are there stories that “must” be shared? Finally, how is the process of memoir writing meaningful to the writer?

College students can study memoir anywhere. How is the location of this class inside a maximum security women’s prison significant? In what ways does the context contribute to the pursuit of and successful realization of the course objectives?

Responsibilities

Understanding the memoir: Please print one copy of the handout for each book we read and **BRING IT WITH YOU TO CLASS**. We will use this rubric to construct a working definition of the memoir genre. At the end of the semester you will use this rubric to evaluate your own personal narrative.

Reflective Analysis: For each book, you will write a short [500 words] critical reflective analysis. I will give you some questions in advance to guide you, but you will not be limited to writing about these questions. The short responses must examine the value and significance of the text. I encourage you to focus on the aspects of the book that you believe to be essential to its inclusion in the genre. As the semester progresses your reflections on the texts should become increasingly independent of my assignments.

Personal narrative: At the end of the semester you will submit a personal narrative [up to 5000 words] about a particular event or memory or series of events and memories from your life. You will submit the narrative in three stages; I will read and respond to each draft. Each student will be paired with one other student from the partner institution; the two of you will share your drafts and provide each other with written feedback and suggestions. Writing is a process. Effective writing requires revision. Each draft should be a clean, revised, complete copy of the personal narrative.

INQ Reflection: Over the course of the semester, we will apply fundamental questions to each memoir that we read. When you submit your personal narrative at the end of the semester, you will include with it a brief reflective summary of the questions as applied to your own narrative.

Blackboard: Your class conference, including all information about assignments, your grades and your class syllabus, is available to you on Blackboard. You are responsible for keeping up with the information and materials posted there.

Class policies

Office Hours: I have scheduled and open office hours throughout the week. You can come to my office to sign up for an appointment or email me if you would like to meet outside of my office hours. Please come see me for help with your written assignments at any stage in the writing process. I am always happy to help you with your essays.

Late Essays: Your essays are due at the *beginning* of class on the specified date. I will lower the grade for an unexcused late essay by one full letter grade for each day it is late; after one full week the essay will receive a grade of zero.

Attendance: As per Oxford College policy, class begins at the designated time. If you are not present when class begins, I will mark you absent. If you are not prepared for class, I will mark you absent. Attendance requires wakefulness. You may miss three days of class without penalty, beyond which I will deduct ten points from your participation grade for each additional unexcused absence. I will excuse absences in the event of a major illness [with a doctor's note], legitimate emergency, or religious observance. If you are absent without an excuse on a day in which an in-class activity is assigned, you will NOT be permitted to make up missed work.

Email: The best way to communicate with an instructor is in person, during class or during office hours. I accept email for the following reasons:

- To cancel an appointment
- To notify me of an absence
- To ask a legitimate question about an assignment

I will not respond to email requesting information contained in the syllabus. If you don't know what is in the syllabus, you aren't prepared for class. Finally, I will ***never respond*** to requests for grades or "averages" via email or in person. Your grades and averages will be available to you on our Blackboard site.

Plagiarism: The work you submit for class must be your own. You may not submit an essay more than once. If you use another author's words or original ideas in your writing, you must give credit to the author by using MLA documentation form as it is presented in *The Bedford Handbook*. All papers suspected of plagiarism will be turned over to the Honor Council (*Oxford College Handbook*). If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, read your handbook and please see me.

Electronic toys: smart phones are strictly forbidden ☹ in the classroom—except for my iPhone 😊, which I use as a stopwatch. If you have one with you, turn it

off. If I hear or see it, I'm going to ask you to remove it from the classroom, and I will mark you absent. Laptops are permitted only when I require them in class.

A Note about Printing: Blue and gold make green! Please feel free to print preliminary drafts on recycled paper, and print double-sided final drafts to save paper. I realize that you must pay for all printing, and I am not able to subsidize this expense [unless you want to clean my house, which I would more than welcome]. You must turn in hard copies of all your essays, no exceptions. Plan ahead. I cannot accept "I have no money left on my swipe card" as an excuse for a late essay.

Evaluation:

Six two-page responses: 5 % each

One fifteen-to-twenty page nonfiction prose essay: 40%

INQ Reflection: 10%

Participation: 20%

Unless you obtain approval from the Academic Dean, there will be no exceptions to the policies outlined in this syllabus, which represents a contract between student and instructor. The instructor will meet her responsibilities in regard to instruction and evaluation of the student, and the student will meet his or her responsibilities in regard to completion of all assignments and adherence to all class policies.

I have read and understand all components of this syllabus. I agree to adhere to all the policies and guidelines outlined in this syllabus.

print your name

signature

date

Understanding the memoir		
Author's goal, objective or motivation	Audience—intended or actual	Enduring [social, political] value

JANUARY

- 19 Introduction and Objectives
- 24 “Publish, Then Flee”; “A Lie That Tells the Truth”; “A Brief History of Memoir-Bashing”; Book Review *Memoir: A History*
- 27 Metro: Volunteer training--MANDATORY

Unit 1: Captivity

- 31 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*
Response due.

FEBRUARY

- 2 Metro: First Class
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas
- 7 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*
- 9 Metro
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas
- 14 *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives*
- 16 Metro
Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives
Response due.
- 21 *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives / 51 Birch Street*
- 23 Metro
Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives / 51 Birch Street
First draft of personal narrative due.

Unit 2: Misery

- 28 *The Only Girl in the Car*

MARCH

- 2 Metro
The Only Girl in the Car
Response due.

7-9 Spring Break—Class will not meet today.

14 *Autobiography of a Face*

16 Metro
Autobiography of a Face
Response due.

21 *Autobiography of a Face*
Second draft due.

23 Metro
Autobiography of a Face/ Questioning Faith
Second draft of personal narrative due.

Unit 3: Grace

28 *Grace after Midnight*
Response due.

30 Metro
Grace after Midnight

APRIL

4 *Night*
Response due.

6 Metro
Night

11 *Night*

13 Metro: Closing Ceremony

18 Paper conferences. Class will not meet.

20 Paper conferences. Class will not meet.

25 Final class: summary discussion of the semester. Final draft of personal narrative due.

Exam Schedule

We will not have a final exam.

