

"All autobiographies are lies." George Bernard Shaw

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

ENGLISH 389R: The Memoir
Spring 2010

Instructor: Stacy Bell
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Office: Humanities Hall 105
Office hours: TTh 1-4, and by appointment

Required Texts

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*
Matthew Chapman, *Trials of the Monkey*
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
Chester Himes, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*
Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*
Tara Bray Smith *West of Then*
Miscellaneous assigned readings
Film: *51 Birch Street*, *Family Name*

Course Description

An examination of the importance to contemporary American society of a vaguely-defined literary genre. Students will read modern and contemporary memoirs published between 1845 and 2007. Students will write a nonfiction creative prose piece about an event from their own lives; these short memoirs will be shared and critiqued by other students in the class.

Objectives

Students will read and discuss the assigned texts and in the process of discussion try to create a unified definition for the memoir genre. In addition to the written texts students will view and discuss a film memoir. For each text, written or visual, the students will have a set of assigned questions which will be used as the basis for class discussion. Students may also expect reading quizzes. Students will submit short written assignments in response to each book, and over the course of the semester, will submit drafts on a nonfiction creative prose piece about a personal event or experience, to be submitted in full and shared with classmates at the end of the semester.

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?

Responsibilities

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.

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: cell phones, blackberries and iPod/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 makes 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%

Final Exam: 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

JANUARY

13 Introduction and Objectives

18 MLK Holiday—Class will not meet today.

20 Metro: Volunteer training

Unit 1: Thrown into the World—Family, Flight, Legacy

- 27 Metro: First Class
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas

FEBRUARY

- 1 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*
- 3 Metro
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas
- 8 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*
- 10 Metro
Infidel
- 15 *Infidel*
- 17 Metro
Infidel
- 22 *Infidel*

Unit 2: At the Crossroads—Stuck, Confused, Rock Bottom

- 24 Metro
Trials of the Monkey

MARCH

- 1 *Trials of the Monkey*
- 3 Metro
Trials of the Monkey/ Yesterday Will Make You Cry
- 8 Spring Break—Class will not meet today.
- 10 Spring Break—Class will not meet today.
- 15 *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*
- 17 Metro
Yesterday Will Make You Cry

Unit 3: Exodus: (Wo)Man in the Mirror

22 *West of Then*

24 Metro
West of Then

29 *West of Then*

31 Metro
The Autobiography of a Face

APRIL

5 *The Autobiography of a Face*

7 Metro: Closing Ceremony

12 *The Autobiography of a Face*

14 Paper conferences

19 Paper conferences

21 Paper conferences

26 Review

Exam Schedule

Students will report to exam room during their appointed time:

Wed., May 5, 9-12:00