Reading and Writing Autobiography

English 3357.001 Spring 2013

M/W 3:30-4:45

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Classroom: BH 234

Reading and Writing Autobiography Syllabus

The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover a past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release.

bell hooks-- talking back

And for another, the essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it, while leaving the greater of his [her] life story available for later milking. It may even be that the personal essayist is more temperamentally suited to this circling procedure, diving into the volcano of the self and extracting a single hot coal to consider and shape, either because of laziness or because of an aesthetic impulse to control a smaller frame.

Philip Lopate—The Art of the Personal Essay

What people choose to preserve in an autobiography is not accidental. It is chosen over other experiences and then written down in a particular way. These choices of content, form, and style, therefore, reveal a great deal about the values of the autobiographers and their culture.

Robert Sayre—American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writings
**Course Description**

The topic of inquiry in this course is U.S. autobiography. We will examine this genre from the perspective of both reading and later writing an autobiographical essay. In the early part of the course, we will focus on analyzing the historical aspects of U.S. autobiography to further understand this quest of identity that represents the predominant theme of personal writing in our country. Specifically, we will emphasize contemporary ethnic authors and their search for identity as Americans. As the course progresses, we will begin examining various theories of autobiography as well as different strategies for writing autobiography. These preliminary studies will help us understand the larger project of this course where students will create an autobiography centered on identity issues.

**Course Objectives**

1. Identify and analyze the variety of American autobiographical discourses authored by diverse writers through different time periods.

2. Describe and differentiate one’s identity through discussions and letter writing to the authors through the process of studying the American history of autobiographical writings.

3. Explore and apply the different techniques used in autobiographical writings.

**Learning Outcomes**

1. Analyze various autobiographical theories and historical developments.

2. Identity, develop, and apply types of research writers conduct as they compose personal nonfiction.

3. Identify and apply a variety of literary and creative writing terms used for autobiography and the personal essay.

4. Analyze and apply texts in one’s own writing related to writing autobiography and the personal essay.

**Course Required Readings:**

Franklin, Benjamin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (online at http://www.earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/)

Karr, Mary, *The Liar’s Club: A Memoir*

Hogan, Linda, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*

Excerpts from James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

**Course Requirements:**

Letters to the author—20%

Project 1—15%

Project 2—25%

Project 3—30%

Participation grade - 10%

Letter Writing. You will be required to write one letter to an author in each particular book that we will cover in class and at least 2 authors of your choosing from *American Lives*. You are encouraged to periodically share these letters with a peer and the class. If you so desire, we can locate the addresses of some of the living authors and send them our correspondences. Each letter will be 300 words.

Project #1: You will be required to write a 5 page research paper that uses one of the historical theories in autobiographical writing (handouts on autobiography theory) to analyze at least two autobiographical works in *American Lives*. If you locate other autobiographical theoretical works, it must meet with my approval. This/These work(s) will encompass the time period that your selected author of this theoretical work used to apply his or her theory.

Project #2: You will be required to write a 5 page personal academic essay that responds to a particular autobiographer/essayist of your choosing who speaks to one particular experience of yours that you wish to articulate in writing. In addition, you will write a 2 page paper explaining the autobiography/essay writers and/or scholars who helped influence your writing techniques.

Project #3: You will be required to write a 10 page autobiographical research essay that can lead to a larger autobiographical work as your main project for this course. Extensive outside research is required on the methodology and writing up of autobiography. Students (especially those comfortable with using multimedia and technology) can also opt to create a virtual autobiography which would consist of an autobiographical website (to be viewed only by the class or myself) that reflects you not only through the traditional text/narrative, but also through multimedia (pictures, sound, film, scanned images or drawings, links to other sites). I will place some of these virtual autobiographies on our wiki page. Since the course is centered on American autobiography (U.S. autobiography to be more precise), the autobiography should reflect where and how you fit in and/or are at odds with a U.S. identity. A Reflective Overview will be required as well.

Participation Grade: Student are expected to attend class on a regular basis and participate in the group activities in class. Your participation grade will be based on how well prepared you are for...
these group activities that reflect your knowledge and understanding of the assigned readings. Excessive absences will jeopardize a good part of your participation grade.

**Course Policies**

1. **Attendance.** You are expected to attend class on a regular basis. Part of your participation grade will be based on attendance. Attendance is a crucial part of a class grounded in liberatory learning and teaching that requires participants to actively engage in classroom discussions, group activities, and peer editing of papers as well as other writing activities. You are considered a valuable teacher in this classroom, and a responsible teacher must be in consistent attendance. You must also attend class on time, so as not to take away from the lecture or collaborative activities.

2. **Deadlines.** You must meet the required deadlines. Late submissions will not be accepted after one week from the required due date and will receive one letter grade off during this week. Late submissions will not be accepted unless there are extenuating circumstances that meet with my approval and are in writing.

3. **Discussions.** You must play an active role in classroom discussions and group activities. Dialogue is a vital part of learning process for this class.

**Reminder to English Majors**

As part of the English undergraduate capstone course (ENGL 4351), all English majors are required to submit a portfolio of writings in different discourse genres that they have completed for their college classes. To help you prepare for this assignment, you should keep a copy of all essays, research papers, literary analyses, creative and report writing, etc., so that you will have an ample selection from which to choose when the portfolio comes due.

**University Policies**

**Grade Appeal Process**

As stated in University Rule 13.02.99.C2, Student Grade Appeals, a student who believes that he or she has not been held to appropriate academic standards as outlined in the class syllabus, equitable evaluation procedures, or appropriate grading, may appeal the final grade given in the course. The burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. A student with a complaint about a grade is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the instructor. For complete details, including the responsibilities of the parties involved in the process and the number of days allowed for completing the steps in the process, see University Rule 13.02.99.C2, Student Grade Appeals, and University Procedure 13.02.99.C2.01, Student Grade Appeal Procedures. These documents are accessible through the University Rules Web site at [http://www.tamucc.edu/provost/university_rules/index.html](http://www.tamucc.edu/provost/university_rules/index.html). For assistance and/or guidance in the grade appeal process, students may contact the Office of Student Affairs.
Notice to Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in Corpus Christi Hall 116. If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom, or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance.

Academic Advising

The College of Liberal Arts requires that students meet with an Academic Advisor as soon as they are ready to declare a major. The Academic Advisor will set up a degree plan, which must be signed by the student, a faculty mentor, and the department chair. The College's Academic Advising Center is located in Driftwood 203E, and can be reached at 825-3466.

Academic Honesty/Plagiarism

The University will not tolerate plagiarism or any other form of intellectual/academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is a serious violation of departmental and University policies, but it is sometimes difficult to understand what plagiarism actually is. Often, students commit unintentional plagiarism (not citing sources properly, for example), because they are unaware of the standards that apply. Regardless, work that is turned in for the course that is plagiarized will be failed. If you are unsure about your use of sources, please consult with me or visit the writing center (in the TLC, in the Glasscock building) for advice on source documentation BEFORE the item is due. For this course, you must use either MLA or APA citation style. Any grammar handbook and many web sites have directions on correct citation.

Acceptance of Diversity

We are the most diverse campus, in terms of racial identity, in the Texas A&M system. This means that we are all meeting and working with people who are different from ourselves in terms of their identities: whether that is defined by their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, and/or religion. Respecting and accepting difference is vital to your success in this class, on this campus, as a future teacher in your own classroom, and in the global community.

Tentative Class Plans

Week One – January 23rd

Review Syllabus and Liberatory Learning hand-out. Writing assignment: Provide background information for me on your experiences with reading autobiographies and your personal writing endeavors.
Week Two – January 28th and January 30th


Week Three – February 4th and 6th

Readings from Part II in American Lives to be voted on by class. Online reading of The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin at http://www.earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/

Week Four – February 11th and 13th

Readings from Part III in American Lives to be voted in class. Continue online reading of The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin at http://www.earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/. Review of Project 1 (hand-out will be distributed in class). Begin researching by next time possible topics for Project 1. Discussion of readings and group in-class assignment.

Week Five – February 18th and 20th

Readings from Part IV in American Lives to be voted on in class. Topic paragraph due on Project 1. Letter 1 due to Benjamin Franklin. Discussion of readings and group in-class assignment. Student Conferences in my office for Project One.

Week Six – February 25th and 27th

Readings from Part V in American Lives to be voted in class. Discussion of readings and group in-class assignment. Peer editing of Project One in class. Begin reading Linda Hogan’s The Woman Who Watches Over the World. Letter two due to an author we’ve read so far in American Lives.

Week Seven – March 4th and 6th


Spring Break – March 11th-15th

Week Eight – March 18th and March 20th
Topic paragraph due on Project Two. Final discussion of Linda Hogan’s *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* and prepare questions to ask her at her reading on Thursday evening. Letter four due to Linda Hogan on Wednesday. I will give her your letters on Thursday evening.

**Week Nine – March 25th and 27th**

Student conferences on Project Two. Read excerpts from James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Peer editing session on Project Two. Discussion and in class assignment on readings.

**Week Ten – April 1st and 3rd**

Final peer editing session on Project Two. Read first half of Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club: A Memoir*. Discussion and in class assignment on readings. Project Due on April 3rd. Distribute handout on Project three.

**Week Eleven – April 8th and 10th**

Topic paragraph due on Project Three. Read second half of Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club: A Memoir*. Read excerpts from her works *Cherry* and *Lit*. I will see if I can arrange a Skyp talk or phone conference call with Mary Karr.

**Week Twelve – April 15th and 17th**

Letter five due to Mary Karr. Student conferences in my office on Project Three. Read excerpts from Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre and William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*. Discussion of readings and application to Project Three.

**Week Thirteen – April 22nd and 24th**

Peer editing of Project Three (partial draft). Review online visual storytelling components for Project Three.

**Week Fourteen – April 29th and May 1st**

Peer editing of complete draft of Project Three. Peer editing of second draft of Project Three.

**Week Fifteen – May 7th**

Project Three due with all drafts and peer editing comments.

Reflective Overview for Project Three will due on the Final Exam date.