

# Memoir Workshop - Spring 2013

## English 242, Section 1



Instructor: Professor Cathleen Miller  
Phone: 408/924-4441  
Office: FO 125

Mailbox: FO 124  
Email: [Miller2go@earthlink.net](mailto:Miller2go@earthlink.net)  
Office hours: Tuesdays 12 - 2:00 p.m. and by appointment

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In a 1997 essay in *Vanity Fair*, cultural critic James Wolcott calls creative nonfiction "a sickly transfusion, whereby the weakling personal voice of sensitive fiction is inserted into the beery carcass of nonfiction." In particular he condemns confessional memoirs as tending toward self-indulgence and notes their authors are "navel gazers" who feel "no personal detail is too mundane to share." Wolcott's words launched a national literary debate.

However, critics of the genre seem uninterested in admitting what makes memoirs popular with readers: America is a nation of 300 million voyeurs. Everyone wants to know the private details of other people's business—what goes on behind closed doors?—to determine how their life compares with everyone else's. This phenomenon explains the explosion in popularity of nonfiction writing in general, and autobiographical writing in particular, with books like *The Liar's Club*, *Angela's Ashes*, and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* topping bestseller charts. (This same voyeuristic obsession can be extended to tabloid journalism—which today has become almost *all* journalism—and the proliferation of reality TV and daytime talk shows that delve into the lurid details of ordinary people's lives.)

While on the surface the memoir obsession may seem like just another fad, I believe the reasons for its popularity can be explained by transitions in our society. All the old ground rules have been cast aside: most of us no longer structure our lives by the tenets of the church, and we're separated from the stability of our childhood homes and families. The careers and material rewards we embraced as the guiding light for all our days fizzled out when we maxed the credit cards at the same time our employers discovered they could create profit by axing thousands of workers and making half the workforce do twice the amount of work. Even the lucky ones amongst us are questioning what to do once they cash in their stock options. So where does that leave us? Millions of people are looking for answers, someone to help them make sense of their existence. By reading memoirs, they can sample other people's lives, try them on for size, and see how they fit.

In this course we will navigate the tight rope between memoir's pitfalls and promise, learning how to tell our unique stories with literary grace and skill.

**The reason for evil in the world  
is that people are not able to tell their stories.  
— Carl Gustav Jung**

---

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

*Angela's Ashes*; Frank McCourt  
*Full Body Burden*; Kristen Iversen  
*This Boy's Life*; Tobias Wolff

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 242**

- To experiment with the techniques of writing memoir
- To improve your skills as nonfiction writers
- To improve your skills as editors
- To prepare you for the MFA exam for nonfiction
- To acquaint you with the methods of professional writers

### **WORKSHOP**

Students will be asked to workshop at least two pieces of your choosing over the course of the semester. Submissions may be personal essays or book chapters, but should range from 1,500 to no more than 5,000 words. *If book chapters are submitted for workshop, please preface with a brief summary of the work and tell us where this sample fits in.*

During the workshop process students will learn to critique each other's work, which is a very different skill than being a good writer. The trick is to 1) praise what's good 2) ascertain what's wrong with a piece 3) offer positive criticism and suggestions on how to fix it—while realizing the individual style and goals of the author may differ from one's own. Students will bring paper copies of their writing projects to class; the work will then be distributed, critiqued at home, and brought to the following class for discussion. Editors are asked to offer line edits on the page and at least a paragraph of typewritten comments that address the overall tenor of the work; please bring two copies of the latter, one to return to the author, and one for me.

### **SHORT ASSIGNMENTS**

We will also do short, two-page writing assignments on a specific memoir topic each week. These will serve to generate ideas for longer works, and to help us develop techniques for writing concisely. Short assignments also give the opportunity to experiment, as they will be graded simply on quantity (the fact you've done the assignment) rather than quality.

### **PRESENTATIONS**

Each student will give two ten-minute talks: one on a facet of literary craft or on an author's history related to our required reading. A second presentation will focus on a memoir of the student's choosing, a book which will ideally serve as a model for your own writing. In this presentation you will analyze the author's craft, e.g. their use of voice, structure or point of view, or perhaps their way of dealing with sensitive material or lapsed memories. The final brief presentation will consist of researching a market for your work and creating a handout to distribute to the class giving us details on how to submit.

**It's a feature of our times that if you write a work of fiction,  
everyone assumes that the people and events in it are  
disguised biography — but if you write an autobiography,  
it's assumed you're lying your head off.**

**— Margaret Atwood**

---

### **PAPER FORMAT**

All material handed in should follow the same guidelines as those for submitting professional manuscripts:

- typewritten, double-spaced, black ink with copy dark enough to be easily read
- one-inch margins on all sides
- text on one side of the paper only
- 12-point type in a highly-legible font, preferably Times New Roman or Courier New
- your name and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet
- title centered on the first page
- pages numbers included
- pages stapled or paper clipped together

Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

### **CLASS ETIQUETTE**

Students are welcome to disagree with one another during class discussions; however, all our dialogue must be conducted with respect for each individual's opinions and work. In addition, the following practices are forbidden while class is in session: eating and the use of laptops or cell phones.

### **OFFICE HOURS**

Please feel free to visit me during my office hours; it's a good idea to make an appointment, otherwise I work on a first-come, first-served basis. Email is meant for brief questions and I encourage you to use it sparingly; this is not an online course. If you are absent, please contact one of your classmates to find out what you missed.

### **ATTENDANCE**

Required, because English 242 depends on your participation each day. You are allowed one unexcused absence before your grade can be dropped, and students who come in after roll call will be considered absent. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than one class, please contact me as soon as possible.

---

**Keep a diary and one day it'll keep you.**

**— Mae West**

**The good writing of any age has always been  
the product of *someone's* neurosis, and we'd have  
a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along  
were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.  
— William Styron**

---

### **GRADE REQUIREMENTS**

Grades are meant to reflect—quite simply—the quality of a student's work. Final grades will be calculated thus:

- 50% workshop submissions (see grading guidelines below)
- 20% two-page assignments (on the number completed)
- 15% presentations (on the quality and delivery of information)
- 15% verbal and written critiques (on the student's dedication to helping his or her peers)

There are no examinations for this class.

#### Grading Guidelines:

A paper: has a creative approach, polished prose free of mechanical problems, keeps the reader's interest, is organized logically, flows smoothly, impresses the reader with the author's ethos and command of the topic, was delivered on deadline and within the appropriate word count.

B paper: has all the above except may contain one or two minor areas for improvement.

C paper: C is considered "average" by departmental policy. Usually a C paper offers lackluster creativity and/or content and needs further refinement at the prose level.

D paper: is either substantially shorter than the required word count, or has so many problem areas that it is difficult to follow because it contains poorly-crafted content or a plethora of mechanical problems. It is below the standard of writing acceptable for a graduate course.

F paper: is a failure to achieve the majority of requirements outlined above for an A paper.

### **DEPARTMENTAL GRADING POLICY**

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU [Catalog](#) ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure. In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

---

**Oscar Wilde said: "Biography lends to death a new terror."  
Well, memoir adds that same promise to parenting.  
— Cathleen Miller**