

Memoirs: Sampling Other Lives - Spring 2020

English 203, Section 1

**You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories.
If people wanted you to write warmly about them,
they should have behaved better.
— Anne Lamott**

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Class schedule: Wednesdays 4:00 p.m.-6:45 p.m.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Memoirists have been accused of being everything from navel-gazing narcissists to cannibals feasting on their loved ones. However, none of this changes the fact that these works of narrative nonfiction are blockbuster bestsellers that have created a dialogue about what it means to lead a certain type of life. They create in-depth self portraits of cultural diversity, requiring no filter from an outside narrator. By reading memoirs, we can sample other people's lives, try them on for size, and see how they fit. We can also find points of startlingly deep connection with total strangers.

In 203 we will look at the literary lives of ten popular memoirists and study how they represent the world around them, while creating themselves as characters. Since this is a craft course we'll be examining the methods the authors use to write creative nonfiction, e.g. voice, point of view, pacing, setting, structure, character development, and narrative devices. Most of our texts are from the MFA reading list, so we'll be preparing you for the exam, as well. In addition, we'll be reading two critical texts on the genre by Karr and Yagoda.

REQUIRED TEXTS

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings; Maya Angelou
Memoir: A History; Ben Yagoda
The Woman Warrior; Maxine Hong Kingston
This Boy's Life; Tobias Wolfe
The Art of the Memoir; Mary Karr
The Liar's Club; Mary Karr
Angela's Ashes; Frank McCourt
Desert Flower; Waris Dirie & Cathleen Miller
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius; Dave Eggers
The Glass Castle; Jeannette Walls
Just Kids; Patti Smith
Barbarian Days; William Finnegan

**Unless you're a doubter and a worrier,
a nail biter, an apologizer, a rethinker,
then memoir may not be your playpen.**

— Mary Karr

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 203

The Student Learning Objectives [SLO] of the Department of English and Comparative Literature: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. Articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

ASSIGNMENTS

Here are the major assignments required for this course:

1. For each narrative text students will turn in a two-page critique that examines the author's use of the techniques listed under "Course Description," e.g. voice, pacing, etc. You may also include your personal reaction to the memoir. For the critical works by Karr and Yagoda, please discuss your response to text.
2. Students will each give a 10-15 minute presentation, working in teams to cover each book: one student will do a critical presentation outlining the author's use of the techniques described under Course Description; a second student will provide background information on the author, particularly his or her professional career and ideally the process of writing our selected work.
3. Our major semester project will be a five to ten-page critical essay in which students choose a theme such as "how authors handle the issue of time" or "negative representations of supporting characters" and analyze works from this class.

4-UNIT COURSE WORKLOAD

Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments. This course will have integrated into the syllabus the following 1-unit enhancement: increased course content and reports.

Everybody just wants to be heard.

— Oprah Winfrey

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

GRADE REQUIREMENTS

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

- 20% two-page critiques (on the number completed)
- 20% presentations (on the quality and delivery of information)
- 20% class participation (on the contributions you bring to class discussion)
- 40% final critical paper (on its originality, insightfulness, and the quality of the prose)

There are no examinations for this class.

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. Note that plusses or minuses may be added to grades that are in between two letter grades.

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.

**There is always a certain leap of faith that editors
have made with their nonfiction writers.
If the trust is broken, things can get very embarrassing
for the writers and the publisher.
— A. Scott Berg**

Writers are cannibals...
It is a terrible thing to be the friend, the acquaintance,
or the relative of a writer.
— Cynthia Ozick

CLASS PROTOCOL

Students are welcome to disagree with one another during class discussion; 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: 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 203 depends on your participation each day. 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.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

The link below contains university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>.

Oscar Wilde said that biography lends to death a new terror.
Well, memoir brings that same terror to parenting.
— Cathleen Miller