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Memoir as Genre

Memoir is a well-traveled genre. Patricia Hampl dates the first Western autobiography to Augustine's thirteen-volume confessions in 397 A.D. (166). Since then, presidents, generals, tyrants, and movie stars have often had a need to tell the stories of their lives. Early memoir—or *memoirs*, as in, "I'm going to write my memoirs"—consisted primarily of personal accounts of the events and accomplishments of famous people, usually written near the end of their lives. The worst of these autobiographic recollections were rambling, unreflective tomes considered by the literati to be marginal forms of literature at best. Too frequently, these writings were adventures in self-aggrandizement, at least partially ghost written, depicting the subject as the protagonist of his or her own story. While the conventions of autobiography called for the authors to offer well-documented evidence of their exploits through diaries, notes, and historic documents, no doubt many of these larger-than-life early memoirists took license to make themselves look wise and heroic in their writings, regardless of the evidence. Because these life stories were often self-indulgent, poorly written, and lacking in literary merit, the audiences for such writings were frequently sparse. In many cases the readers were historians, biographers, detractors, family members, or unabashed fans of the well-known person, eager to read any crumb by the famous one.

Contemporary Memoir (CM)

Thankfully, something remarkable has happened to this genre during the last twenty years or so. Autobiography and the old *memoirs* discussed earlier have been reborn as literary memoir and transformed into a lively and highly readable genre, maintaining long runs on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nonfiction books. Contemporary writers of memoir, some of whom were completely unknown prior to the publication

of their books, have begun to use the tools of the novelist and the poet, bringing to the genre such innovations as character development, scene setting, dialogue, figurative language, metaphor, symbol, and image. Even more important perhaps, as Patricia Hampl has pointed out, "contemporary memoir has reaffirmed the primacy of the first-person voice in American imaginative writing established by Whitman's 'Song of Myself'" (19). The best examples of this reborn genre read like good novels rather than dry accounts of historic or daily events.

Perhaps to distinguish the new, more literary and livelier memoir from the older writings, critics and writers have come to refer to these new versions of memoir as *Contemporary Memoir* (CM). No longer merely heroic epics of lives well lived, CMs explore both what writers can remember and understand from their lives and also take readers with them on journeys into unknown territory where writers use the form to try to understand and make sense of unexamined experiences they have yet to comprehend fully. CM has become a genre in which any reasonably reflective individual can construct a version of his or her own life.

CMs are often episodic and driven by short ministories of events and places. Many of these texts derive their continuity and sense of artistic unity through narrative structures. Through the author's recounting of the unfolding of family members' lives over time—sometimes over multiple generations—a larger, more compelling story emerges. CMs are reflective and often partially fictionalized creations that *reveal* truths and mysteries of lives we would never know if the author had not chosen to tell us.

We aren't sure of the birth date of this remarkable genre, but it came into its own in the early eighties. We first began to apply the term CM to these texts after reading Russell Baker's *Growing Up* in 1982. In interviews following the best-seller success of his memoir, Baker confessed that he wasn't sure why anyone would be interested in the details of his life. But, in the first chapter of the book, as Baker recounts the days of his mother's death, he has an epiphany that lights the spark for this new genre. He realizes that when his mother is gone, all of the stories of his growing up will go with her. He writes, "These hopeless end-of-the-line visits with my mother made me wish I had not thrown off my own past so carelessly" (8). In this tender moment, he realizes that he has not been a keeper of the family lore, nor has he shared any family history with his own children. He confesses this failing and offers, "We all come from the past and children ought to know what went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord. . .'" (8).

This metaphor of the braided cord and the realization that they, too, have done little to explore and preserve their own past has since seized many writers. They feel driven to create versions of their own lives and to share those quite personal and revealing stories with readers. Indeed, some critics and detractors of memoir, such as James Atlas, have labeled it a "confessional genre" in which writers tell all to "an audience of voyeurs" (26). To be sure, there are those out there who view CM as an opportunity to practice a kind of self-help psychoanalysis or to find redemption for their sins. Working as a memoirist can almost certainly take a writer to some tight spots, places of dark mystery, and uncomfortable self-discovery; but the effective memoirist can chose to *conceal*

as well as *reveal*. The most well-crafted of CMs derive their power not from the narcissistic recounting of lurid detail, nor from a text version of reality television, but rather from the honest recounting of human struggles and triumphs. The best CMs do not read like pages from tabloids, but rather like the rich stories of literary novels.

William Zinsser's book, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (1998), also played an important role in the birth and development of CM. The book derives from a series of talks by well-known writers organized and hosted by Zinsser for the Book-of-the-Month Club and held in the New York Public Library. In *Inventing the Truth*, Zinsser points out that unlike autobiography, memoir is not the whole story of a life. He writes, "Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. . . . Memoir is a window into a life" (15). Annie Dillard (1998) echoed this notion of memoir as a selective genre when she asserted that "the memoirist must decide two crucial points: what to leave in and what to leave out" (143). Zinsser continues, "Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events" (6). Selectivity, choosing just the right details, is one of the hallmarks of the CM.

Since the memory is an inevitably flawed instrument that is both unreliable and subject to interpretation, any memoir is at least in part an invention. Memory is quirky, partial, holding seemingly meaningless details and losing big moments and subtle nuances of relationships and events. Memoirs are often written at the very edges of a writer's memory where recollections are hazy and not known with certainty. Remembering can be impressionistic and partial, and writing memoir is an attempt to shape those images into story.

Another important and timely influence on the growth of Contemporary Memoir was the publication of Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983). Delivered originally as a series of three autobiographic lectures at Harvard, *Beginnings* was important not only for its literary quality but also because a writer of Welty's reputation and stature among the literati penned it. If Welty wrote in the genre, it was a clear endorsement of the relevance of the genre. Perhaps just as important as this publication was for the authorization of CM were the insights Welty offered into the value and purpose of writing memoir. She reminds us that "[w]riting a story or a novel is one way of discovering *sequence* in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life" (90). We think her statements still hold true for memoirists of all ages.

Patricia Hampl has also been a significant player in the development of CM as a respected genre. In her seminal essay, "Memory and Imagination" (1999), she situates "memoir at the intersection of narration and reflection, of story telling and essay writing. It can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story" (33). For us, that definition of memoir that locates it between story and essay is what also distinguishes it from biography and autobiography. The memoirist is not limited by a responsibility to scholarly accuracy as are biographers who must rely on factual documents, eye-witness accounts, and historical chronologies, though memoirists may

certainly use those tools. Rather, it is the memoirist's responsibility to work with the partial information and inadequate data that the mind offers in order to construct a text. As Hampl (1999) states, "Memory is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures" (26). Memoir is unique as a genre because the writer must try to find the relationships between mind pictures and feelings, seeking to reconcile through story the details of what is remembered and what has been forgotten. The memoir is ultimately a version of one's life constructed from facts and feelings, truths and inventions.

Types of Memoir

In many bookstores, memoir is still shelved in a section titled Biography. Take a casual stroll through that section, and you will be stunned by the proliferation of titles. Some will actually be biographies, but the great majority will be memoirs. You will know that fact because after the title, the publisher or author will offer as an explanatory subtitle, A *Memoir*. Just perusing titles, however, may not be a very sanguine way of coming to understand the breadth and diversity of this genre. In order to aid this process, we have extensive bibliographies of memoir titles in Chapter 12. Bibliographic information on all books we use as examples in the chapters that follow can be found there. If you are relatively unaware of this genre, let us suggest several possible schemas for classifying, cataloging, and ultimately selecting appealing examples of the genre. If you are an aficionado of the genre, you may enjoy comparing your favorites to our categories and bibliographies. Following are some of the subcategories of memoir that are interesting to us.

Cross-cultural

One of the most remarkable qualities of CM is the extent to which the genre crosses cultural, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. Writers of this version of memoir use the power of story and the uniqueness of their own cultural experiences to craft quite diverse accounts of their growing-up years in locations throughout the world. Some examples include African writers such as Ken Wiwa; African American writers such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., James McBride, and Jamaica Kincaid; Chinese American writers such as Da Chen, Anchee Min, Li-Young Lee, and Maxine Hong Kingston; Vietnamese American writers such as Andrew X. Pham and Kien Nguyen; Cambodian American writers such as Chanrithy Him; Latino and Hispanic American writers such as Tiffany Ana Lopez, Flor Fernández Barrios, Marie Arana, and Jimmy Baca; Jewish writers such as Louise Kehoe and Michael Heller; and Afghani American writers such as Saira Shah.

Personal Journeys

Writers use CM to chronicle personal journeys, literal and metaphoric, that they have undertaken. Writers such as Tobias Wolff, Andrea Ashworth, and Frank McCourt

preserve stories of their past, however painful and challenging. Steve Fiffer, Kay Redfield Jamison, and Stephen Kuusisto chronicle their journeys to overcome a handicap or physical disability. Frederick Buechner, Annie Dillard, Jane Goodall, Patricia Hampl, Annie Lamott, and Lauren Winner pursue spiritual journeys. Joan London and Nasdijj make sense of troubling and chaotic childhoods.

Multiple Memoirs

One might think that each of us has only one memoir book in us, but a number of writers of CM have written multiple memoirs, looking at their lives through a variety of lenses. In this category, try Mary Karr, Kathleen Norris, Alix Kates Shulman, Patricia Hampl, Jill Ker Conway, Homer Hickam, and Elie Wiesel, all of whom have written accounts of different periods in their lives.

Blurred Genre

Among the most interesting phenomena associated with the evolution of the Contemporary Memoir is the way in which writers have blurred the hard lines of genre distinction. One of the most successful examples of this genre hybridization has been created by writers who merge their ability to write about their observations in the natural world and at the same time, in the same one book, author memoir. One of the most unique examples of this genre experimentation is the work of Janisse Ray in which she alternates chapters of the natural history of her native Georgia with stories from her childhood growing up in a junkyard in south Georgia. Terry Tempest Williams, Thomas McGuane, and Barry Lopez also are adept at using landscape as character in their memoirs.

Collections

In addition to single, book-length examples of CM, collections of shorter life stories are emerging in themed books. Annie Dillard edits such a book, as does Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alex Harris, and Claudine O'Hearn. One of our personal favorites in this category is Marilyn Sewell's *Resurrecting Grace: Remembering Catholic Childhoods*.

The subcategories in the genre of CM continue to develop as more memoirs are published, but our bibliographies in Chapter 12 will serve as a rather thorough introduction to the genre. Notice, however, that we have omitted the more traditional memoirs, such as those by Bill Clinton (2004) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (2004), that have been published in recent years. We have done so because our focus here is not on traditional memoir; it is, instead, on Contemporary Memoir as a genre, not just as a publication date.

Teaching Memoir

We have been teaching students to read and write memoir for the past fifteen years or so. We have used memoir with elementary, middle, and high school–aged young

people. We have also used it in college-level freshman composition, and we use it in graduate English methods classes and with creative nonfiction writing classes. Throughout our experience of teaching memoir, our writers often become deeply engaged in journeys of memory, journeys in which they chronicle their struggles of growing up. Or these memoir writings may become explorations into the enduring family mysteries that writers still don't quite understand, with the writer struggling to come to some understanding or sense of resolution about the family puzzles.

Sometimes people ask us, "Should people, particularly students, be writing honestly about their life experiences? Aren't you playing psychiatrist—or worse, voyeur—to their lives?" These are questions we have thought about right from our earliest use of memoir. Dan remembers a writing workshop in a middle school in a coastal Georgia town. The school population was primarily African American children from poor and working-class families. As the students were working on their memoir pieces about family, an eighth-grade young woman drafted a piece that detailed why she wished she could live with her "real" (her word) mother instead of the woman with whom she was living. The girl's mother was serving time in the county jail for a drug offense, and the child had been placed in a foster home. The piece was so poignant and revealing that Dan was a little uncomfortable with her taking it public. He said that he was happy she had written such an honest piece, but asked her if she would prefer to keep it in a private place in her portfolio; he secretly hoped she would choose that option. "Oh, no," she said with a smile. "I have already shared it with my group, and they really thought it was cool. I want to post it on the Pieces in Progress bulletin board in the hall." Clearly, definitions of *private* and comfort zones will vary among writers.

From that early experience and many similar subsequent experiences in teaching memoir, we learned that our students are the best judges of what they should reveal in memoir, even if at times we may feel somewhat uncomfortable with their painful honesty. Our responsibility as teachers is to eschew the roles of psychologist and censor and to embrace the role of writing coach. With sensitive and caring attention to our students' stories, our job is not to fall into those stories with sympathy, hand wringing, or advice, but rather to help students craft their chosen stories with as much elegance and power as possible.

It has been our experience that student writers often seize upon a safe and supportive environment in which to explore difficult times and personal struggles. Abuse—both physical and sexual—neglect, divorce, gender confusion, alienation from family, and heart-wrenching losses may all become part of our students' memoirs. But it is our experience that the recountings of these difficult times in writing are often followed by healing, reconciliation, and awareness of personal growth for the student writers.

The stories are astounding. A thirty-something woman in Dan's writing methods class, returning to college to achieve her teaching license, wrote of her childhood among drunken and drug-using parents. The climate in her home became so volatile that she ran away as a junior in high school. As she was writing this story, she was

moved to call her father to whom she hadn't spoken in twenty years. What followed that courageous phone call was a long-overdue reconciliation and an incredibly powerful memoir. In another class, several Vietnamese American teens recounted hair-raising stories of their escape from war-torn Vietnam in the mid-1970s. In another class, a mother with two teenage sons wrote the stories of growing up in her native India because she wanted to share her heritage with her boys. In a third-grade class, a boy wrote a memoir of his struggle to overcome epilepsy and to achieve his highest goal: "to be a normal kid," as he put it. In a middle school class, a girl chronicled the breakup of her family and the choices she had to make between parents and where she would live. In a high school composition class, a shy young woman's group responded so sensitively to her early drafts about growing up with a bipolar mother that she spent the entire semester crafting a remarkably literary account of those years. These may sound like stories from the *Oprah* show or Dr. Phil, but these vignettes are only a few examples of the power of memoir to heal and to transform painful memories into stories of triumph and growth.

Memoir as Literature Study

Contemporary Memoir is also an ideal genre for study as literature because its rules have not been set in concrete. Mercifully, there are not "five elements" to the memoir as traditionalists will claim about the short story. Rather, CM as a form continues to surprise and confound its readers. CM as a genre is in a constant state of change and development. Its conventions and constraints are seemingly challenged by the publication of each new memoir book. We think of the genre as dynamic and tectonic, shifting and changing, forming and reforming itself. Each reading of a new memoir adds to the possibilities of the form. Readers, who are teachers and students alike, are witness to an emerging genre that has not been overly dissected by critics or flattened by instruction. Here is an authentic opportunity for students to share in the process of literary criticism and in the analysis of an emerging genre.

Of course as English teachers, we always feel a little more comfortable when we are teaching genres that we have read and studied in graduate school, but toss out those stale college notes on literary criticism. This is a fresh genre and an innovative teaching framework to study *with* your students.

DIVING INTO MEMOIR

We like to take a very inductive approach to the introduction of memoir into our classes. Most students have read very few memoirs and have only the vaguest notions about the genre. We want them to feel the sense of discovery and license that an emerging genre like memoir affords them. We try to *tell* them as little as possible about the genre at the beginning, knowing instead that as we read and write memoir with our students, we and they can begin to understand its power and identify its features.

We usually begin by finding out what students already know about genre and genre studies. Do they know what the word *genre* means and how it is used in literature?

What genre can they name (short stories or poetry or essays, for example) and what exemplars (titles and features of one genre that distinguish it from the next, for example) can they list of that genre? When they read a poem or a novel, what kinds of unique expectations do they have for that specific genre? Teachers of younger children may want to begin by asking a more age-appropriate series of questions centering on how students might catalog or classify the different kinds of books they read, such as fairy tales, nursery rhymes, or fantasy. What kinds of expectations do they have when they read a particular kind of book or text?

We then read excerpts of CMs with our students and engage in some unrehearsed, cold turkey critical theory and homegrown scholarly explanations of this emerging genre. Again, we ask key questions. What is the tone of the passage? Is it written in first-person or in third-person omniscient point of view? Does it sound like a textbook or a novel or something in between? What is the topic of the passage, and how will that topic relate to us, the readers? What is appealing about the passage?

One of our favorite activities for beginning a study of memoir as genre is what we call Examining Contemporary Memoir Texts or, more simply, Book Examination. For this activity, we bring in a stack of CMs and lead students through an inspection of these texts. We use the guide in Figure 1–1 titled Examining Contemporary Memoir Texts to engage students in an anthropological dig in the artifacts of the genre. We use this guide with our high school and college students. For middle school and elementary students, you may need to reword or simplify the form. Of course, not all memoirs contain all of the features we list on the guide, but most memoirs will have some of these elements with which the aspiring memoirist will want to be familiar as possibilities and options that enhance the genre, theme, and purpose of the author's writings.

Final Thoughts on Memoir

What we've tried to do in this first chapter is to provide a brief overview of Contemporary Memoir, both as a genre and as an option for teaching. We like memoir because we can use it to develop a large, inclusive framework that gives us the opportunity to work with our students as readers and as writers. Memoir offers possibilities for in-depth literary study and analysis and for connecting literature to personal experience through writing. We've worked with this genre for over fifteen years with students in kindergarten through graduate school and still find it to be engaging, versatile, and dynamic. In the following chapters, we'll detail how we teach memoir in our classrooms, how we use it as a literary form, and how we devise a framework for writing based on memoir.

As you read this book, you might want to make notes in your own Idea Notebook for how these activities will work for your students, or how you want to pursue some of these readings and teaching ideas in a discussion group with your colleagues. Adaptation is the key to inventive teaching, so we encourage you to think, plan, jot, and discuss as you read this text.

Examining Contemporary Memoir Texts

Directions: Use this guide for examining how contemporary memoirs are organized and what interesting features appear in these texts. Examine at least three of the memoirs that are in our classroom today. Discuss the texts and the prompts below in your Writer's Groups. Jot your responses on your individual sheets in the spaces provided below.

Title: What is the title of the memoir? What is its significance? Does it seem to be literal, or does it seem to have a symbolic or metaphoric meaning? How do you know? How does the title serve the text?

Front Material: What is on the pages that appear before the opening page of text? Is there an introduction or dedication? Are there quotations, graphics, pictures, or maps? Is there a prologue or an explanatory essay? If so, who wrote it and what is its purpose? How do the front materials enhance the memoir?

Table of Contents: Is there a table of contents? How is the book divided: by chapters, sections, or in other ways? How many of each type of division exists? Do the divisions have titles or numbers? List some examples. What seems to be the overall effect of the divisions on the organization of the memoir?

Visual Material: Does the author use pictures, maps, drawings, photographs, or any other visual aids in the text? If so, what is the impact of the visual materials on the text?

Textual Material: Does the author use dialogue? If so, how is it punctuated? In what tense is the text written—past, present, future? Does the author insert phrases in a language other than English? If so, how are those passages incorporated into the text? Is there anything unusual about the typeset or about how the book is laid out? How do these textual features impact the overall memoir?

End Material: How does the book end? Is there an epilogue? Is there any documentation at the end of the book? Does the author take any parting shots? What is the impact of the end materials on the memoir?

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Figure 1–1. *Examining Contemporary Memoir Texts*

We also find that we can easily devise grades for multiple written pieces, writer's group activities, and responses to literary selections within this framework; and that we can easily meet many state and national standards and practice state-mandated writing forms within the framework of memoir. In the following chapters, we'll highlight some of those strategies that we use, and we specifically discuss assessment in Chapters 10 and 11. Additionally, as you read this book, we encourage you to jot notes in your Idea Notebook of the ways in which you can meet state standards and district guidelines as well as your personal goals for your students' progress in literacy as you teach memoir.

While you're at it, try picking up a few of the memoirs that we list in Chapter 12 that sound interesting to you and start reading in the genre, looking for excerpts that are suitable for use with your students. Relax, read, enjoy, think, and create as you join us on this exploration of a compelling and contemporary new genre.

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