

LS 280.72

FALL 2009

THE UNCONVENTIONAL MEMOIR

TUESDAYS, 6:15-8:45 PM

INSTRUCTOR: MARGARET SARTOR

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

The memoir is an increasingly diverse and evolving genre. This course is for students who want to write their story and explore forms outside the conventional chronological autobiographical narrative, while also reaching for the highest standards of literary achievement.

While working on their own memoir projects, students will examine, discuss and write about the ways in which other writers and artists have used essays, books, graphic novels, and photobooks to tell personal stories. In this course, we will discuss not only *how* we tell personal stories, but also *why* putting down the details of an experience give it meaning. As a class, we will explore questions of voice, point-of-view, truth and responsibility. Students are expected to look hard at the ways in which they define themselves, at the iconography and the underlying personal, social and cultural influences that have shaped their identity. They are expected to push themselves as writers to tell a compelling and meaningful story.

The goal of the course is two-fold: Over the course of the semester, students will write a story, or stories, out of their own history, attempting to tell that story in a way that is both personally meaningful and also able to communicate to a larger audience. While working on their memoir stories, students will read and discuss books, plays, and essays that address how the larger issues and challenges of this genre relate to their own endeavor.

Each class meeting will involve a group discussion of the reading assigned for that week. Each week, two to three students will be asked to formulate questions in advance to begin the class discussion. Some weeks, the instructor will make presentations of photographic books. These visual presentations will complement the reading and the specific topics under consideration that week. In the second half of the semester, students will be asked to read or present their own work to the class for group critique.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In this course, it is important to create a supportive and critical environment in which every participant feels comfortable revealing personal stories and also feels inspired to experiment and produce work at very high level. Class participation throughout the semester is expected and class attendance is required.

The semester-long assignment is to write a series of true stories, the form and content to be determined and defined individually by each student. This is primarily a writing course, but students are encouraged to use visual material as prompts to writing or as part of their memoir. Students may be required to write a short response to the weekly reading assignment, and will be required to fully participate in class discussions, relating the reading to their own in-progress memoir stories. Each student will be assigned two or three weeks in which he or she is responsible for formulating discussion questions based on the assigned reading material and these must be posted for the class at least 24 hours prior to the class meeting/discussion. I will critique every assigned story. Students are expected to revise their stories based my comments. Some stories will discussed and critiqued in class. The final memoir project should consist of the best new and revised stories produced over the semester. These finished stories are due in the last class.

No final exam.

EVALUATION

Class participation and evidence of ongoing work are critical to a positive evaluation. Contribution to the class discussions and critiques will be considered in the evaluation. The semester-long memoir project, consisting of a series of stories written and revised over the course of the semester, will be due in the last class. The final grade will largely be determined by the strength of that project. Students are welcome to meet with me outside of the class at any time during the semester to discuss their stories, their revisions and how I view their progress in the class.

Required Books

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

William deBuys and Alex Harris, *River of Traps*

Margaret Sartor, *Miss American Pie*

Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*

Lisa Kron, *2.5 Minute Ride and 101 Humiliating Stories*

Essays by: Henry Louis Gates, Virginia Holman, Toni Morrison, Russell Banks,

James Alan McPherson, David Foster Wallace and others

Some Other Suggestions:

Books

Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*

William Styron, *Darkness Visible*

Anne Pachett, *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*

John Berger, *And My Heart, Our Faces, Brief as Photos*

Alex Harris and Alice George, *A World Unsuspected*

Beth Ann Fennelly, *Great With Child*

Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*

Films

Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man*

Ross McElwee, *Sherman's March*

Alan Berliner, *Nobody's Business*

Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*

Photo Books

Robert Frank, *The Americans*

Mitch Epstein, *Family Business*

David Goldblatt, *In Boksburg*

Eudora Welty, *Photographs*

Larry Clark, *Tulsa*

Michael Disfarmer, *Photographs*