

American Self-Life Writing

Professor Daniel A. Nathan
AM 362, American Autobiography
TLC 308, TTH 9:40-11:00 AM
Office: TLC 330 (580-5023)
Office Hours: TTH 11:00-12:00 & by appt.
E-mail: dnathan@skidmore.edu

“There is no more suspect literary genre in America than the autobiography: always self-serving, often falsified, and more than likely a wretched piece of writing in the bargain—a form, a skeptic might say, that confesses all while telling nothing. The autobiography stands as a kind of amalgam of the cunning of the mountebank and the faltering of the do-it-yourselfer. It can blend the patently false with the scathingly true. Nowadays, especially, one is forced to ask if it is a literary genre or a pop culture device for self-advertisement.

Of all literary genres, it is the autobiography that seems most richly and strikingly American...”

—Gerald Early, essayist

Course Description & Objectives

This class examines American narratives that represent some of the stories that have shaped our national experience. Although it is important to recognize that the people who appear in print are not the same as the flesh and blood people who told, wrote, or lived the lives recounted, their stories nonetheless reveal a great deal about who they were and who they wanted to be, as well as something about our cultural past. Among other themes, we will try to discern what is “American” about these narratives and how each writer presents his or her sense of “self.” We will also explore what these stories tell us about their respective historical and social contexts. Ultimately, our goal is to transform individual stories into cultural narratives to understand more fully what happened in our collective past.

This course will heavily stress class discussion, centering upon considerations of the assigned readings (texts should be brought to class). Discussions are collective endeavors that demand everyone’s preparation, attendance, and participation. Learning to participate in a discussion involves social and intellectual skills that are an essential part of one’s education. These include: listening to others and learning to absorb and synthesize their remarks; learning to respond constructively and analytically to others’ ideas; learning to develop and articulate positions of one’s own; responding to criticism; and learning to modify or discard an argument as one comes to see another, more satisfactory one. Students are expected to come to class eager to share their ideas about the topics under consideration and to question our readings and one another.

To that end, I urge you to come to class prepared, to be open minded to and respectful of different points of view, and most importantly, to share your ideas. Like all American Studies courses, this class is also intended to make us better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

Books

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself*
Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*
Mary McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*
Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*
Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*
William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth*

Films

Jeanne Jordan, *Troublesome Creek*
Ross McElwee, *Sherman’s March*

Requirements

Course requirements include three papers (the first will be 4-5 pages, the second will be 5-7 pages, and the third will be 7-10 pages), an individual presentation, active class participation, and quizzes/in-class writing assignments. You must complete all assignments in order to pass this course. The break down of grades is as follows:

In-class Writing Assignments & Quizzes	10%	
First Paper	15%	(due October 2)
Second Paper	20%	(due October 30)
Third Paper	30%	(due December 4)
Individual Presentation	10%	
Class Participation	15%	

Attendance & Participation

Because the success of the course depends upon your participation, attendance is mandatory. Four or more absences will adversely affect your final grade: six or more absences and you fail the course. Active participation requires that you attend class regularly (and on time), that you come to class prepared (i.e., having carefully read and thought about the assigned material), and that you share your perspectives, ideas, and questions.

Special Needs

Anyone who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing, or other class requirements should see me after class or during my office hours so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Reading Schedule

- 9/10: Introductions, goals, policies, reading schedule
- 9/15: Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* excerpt
Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography"
Balée, "From the Outside In: A History of American Autobiography"
Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* excerpt
- 9/17: Grimes, "We All Have A Life. Must We All Write About It?"
Peysner, "The Ugly Truth"
Dawidoff, "The Trouble With Memoirs"
- 9/22: Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth*, 3-40, 61-81, 101-118
- 9/24: Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth*, 119-181
- 9/29: Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, vii-85
- 10/1: Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, 85-112
Davis, "Mary White Rowlandson's Self-Fashioning As Puritan Goodwife"
- 10/6: Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, vii-19, 27-104
- 10/8: Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 104-168
Seavey, excerpts from *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life*
- 10/13: Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, vii -23, 29-75
- 10/15: Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 75-125
Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man"
- 10/20: Adams, from *The Education of Henry Adams*
James, from *Notes of a Son and Brother*
- 10/22: Goldman, from *Living My Life*
Stein, from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*
- 10/27: McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, 3-168
- 10/29: McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, 169-245
Eakin, "Fiction in Autobiography: Ask Mary McCarthy No Questions"
- 11/3: Kazin, from *A Walker in the City*
Malcolm X (as told to Haley), from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- 11/5: No Class—American Studies Association Annual Meeting
- 11/10: Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 1-149
- 11/12: Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 153-212
Fine, "Claiming Personas and Rejecting Other-Imposed Identities: Self-Writing as Self-Righting in the Autobiographies of Richard Rodriguez"

- 11/17: TBD
11/19: TBD
- 11/24: TBD
11/26: No Class—Thanksgiving
- 12/1: Jordan, *Troublesome Creek* (film)
Holden, “Moment of Realization: Home Has Disappeared”
Kauffmann, “Matters of Fact”
- 12/3: McElwee, *Sherman’s March* (film)
Canby, “Sherman’s March”
Attanasio, “Sherman’s March”
- 12/8: Presentations
12/10: Presentations
Course evaluations and concluding comments

Screening Schedule

- 11/30: Jordan, *Troublesome Creek* TLC 301, 7 PM
12/2: McElwee, *Sherman’s March* TLC 301, 7 PM

Note: You are *not* required to attend these screening sessions, but you are required to have watched the films in question before we discuss them in class.