

Syllabus
MEMOIR CLASS

MPW 999
Prof: Tristine Rainer
Class # 39280
3 units
Wednesdays, 4:00-6:40 PM
Room: WPH 201

In this course you will learn to shape and dramatize ‘what you know’, i.e. your life experience, into a publishable text that will engage others. We will begin with exploring the many genres and hybrids of autobiographic writing and progress to strategies for marketing your autobiographic work. We will explore current trends and look at recent controversies regarding the definition of nonfiction memoir and the prerogatives of creative nonfiction. By the end of the class you should have a handle on the complex ethical and legal problems associated with publishing memoir. You will understand the genre expectations for your work and the opportunities and limitations within it. You will have developed the skill of turning nonfiction events into a narrative that employs fictional devices such as scenes, dialog and figurative language.

Course requirements:

This class is your opportunity to work on a book length memoir (or autobiographic novel) or on a collection of personal essays (or autobiographic short stories) that could eventually become a book. Students will write three chapters plus the outline, book proposal and query letter for a book length autobiographic work (or will write three personal essays or autobiographic short stories) plus query letters for a “quilt style” autobiographic work.

Students will be expected to read and be prepared to discuss in class the following books available at USC bookstore and online:

Title: YOUR LIFE AS STORY Author: Tristine RAINER Publisher: Penguin Group. Paperback. Required.

Title: THE WOMAN WARRIOR: MEMOIRS OF A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOSTS Author: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON Publisher: VINTAGE Paperback. Required

Title: SHOT IN THE HEART Author: MIKAL GILMORE Publisher: ANCHOR Paperback. Required.

Title: HEARTBREAKING WORK OF STAGGERING GENIUS Author: DAVE EGGERS Publisher: VINTAGE Paperback. Optional

Title: GIRL INTERRUPTED Author: SUSANNA KAYSEN Publisher: RANDOM HOUSE Paperback. Required.

Title: PAULA Author: ISABEL ALLENDE Publisher: HARPERPERENNIAL Paperback. Required.

Grades:

Class participation, including discussion of reading and feedback on other students' writing: 15%

Quality of writing in final, revised versions of assignments: 85%

First and second drafts of assignments will not be considered in grading as long as they meet deadlines. This is to encourage you to take risks in the writing you bring in to be work-shopped. An A grade is for work ready to be submitted for publication. One chapter (or story or essay) will be submitted mid-term for grading. Your additional two chapters and your book proposal will be submitted at the end of the term for grading.

Schedule:

Aug 29 Class overview presented. Introduction of types of autobiographic writing. Story structure in autobiobiographic writing introduced with class exercises.

Homework. Read chapters 2 –6 in *Your Life as Story*. Bring in 10 ideas to pitch for your autobiographic work. Submit 3 paragraph, 3 act structure for one of these with copies for everyone.

Sept. 5 Students pitch their projects identifying the 'genre of the self' to which you the adheres. Examination of elements of story structure in the 3 paragraph, 3 act pages brought to class.

Homework Read chapters 14-17 in *Your Life as Story*. Begin reading required books.

Sept. 12 Guest lecturer: James Cass Rogers, author of the novels *Daytime Affair* and *Starcrossed*. Jim will work with you on translating personal emotions into vivid scenes.

Homework Read Ch. 19 “Humor” in *Your Life as Story*. Write a humorous autobiographic scene or short piece with copies for all class members.

Sept 19 Guest lecturer Mindy Schneider, author of *Not a Happy Camper, a Memoir* published 2007 by Grove Press. Mindy was a sitcom writer and studied autobiographic writing with Tristine Rainer. She will help you sharpen your ability to laugh at yourself and to make your reader laugh, too.

Homework: Read chs. 9,10,11, and 21 *Your Life as Story*.

Sept. 27 Guest lecturer Chip Jacobs, prize winning journalist, Los Angeles Times, Pasadena Weekly, author *Wheeling the Deal The Outrageous Legend of Gordon Zahler, Hollywood's Flashiest Quadriplegic*, Jan, 2008, Behler Publications. Chip will respond to your questions about how to write about family members and get their co-operation. He will bring sample releases and give you with tips on researching personal stories.

Homework Complete a chapter (essay or story) from your autobiographic work. Make copies to bring for all class members. Prepare for discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston *The Woman Warrior*

Oct. 3 Exploration of the current controversies regarding truth in autobiographic writing and Hong Kingston’s rewriting of her personal history.

Workshop student chapters (essays or stories) in class.

Homework: From here on students will be responsible for bringing in new writing, or re-writes of writing that has been work-shopped in class) every week until the last class.

Prepare one or two page “Intro” section of your book proposal, the “sizzle”, and bring copies for all class members

Prepare to discuss *Girl, Interrupted* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* in class

Oct 10 Discussion of New Autobiographies that break the form, including *Girl, Interrupted* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.
Workshopping of student chapters, stories and “intro” to proposal.

Homework: Finish writing second chapter (or your second story or essay) and bring copies for entire class. Bring copy of revised first chapter to hand into professor for mid-term grading.

Oct 17 Discussion of memoirs currently on the bestseller lists. Discussion of researching autobiographic works like yours and your need to find an original angle. Workshop students' second chapters..

Homework: Write market analysis for book proposal and bring copies for all class members. Prepare to discuss Mikal Gilmore *Shot in the Heart*.

Oct 24 Discussion of POV issues when interweaving memoir and portrait, with reference to *Shot in the Heart*. Workshop chapters and market analysis pages.

Homework: write query letter for your autobiographic work. Bring copies for all classmates.

Oct 31 Workshop query letters and chapters.

Homework: Write chapter outline of your autobiographic work. Bring copies for all class members.

Nov 7 Workshop chapter outlines and revised work to date. Discuss the issue of narrative voice in autobiographic writing.

Homework: Write a two-paragraph description of the narrator behind the voice in your autobiographic work and bring copies to class.

Finish writing your third chapter (or story or essay) and bring copies for all class members.

Be prepared to discuss *Paula* in class.

Nov. 14 Discussion of transparency storytelling technique in *Paula* and in other autobiographic works. Discussion of flashbacks and flashforwards. Workshop third chapters, etc.

Homework: Prepare revised work for last workshop opportunity.

Nov 21 Workshop revised student work.

Homework: Prepare polished final versions of complete book proposal and three chapters (or three stories or essays).

Nov 28 Completed book proposal and three chapters, stories and essays due for final grade.

Discussion of where to submit your autobiographic work and how to market it: platforms, blogs, radio, websites, discussion groups, news articles, etc.

