First-person fiction can provide immediate, direct access to the thoughts and the perspective of a narrator. But, as Paul Auster reminds us, as soon as we have a first-person narrator, we have a writer—a speaking-I who is in the process of building a narrative and constructing (or deconstructing) a self.

In this class, we will examine the different narrative techniques deployed in first-person fiction, and how they inform and complicate our understanding of identity, authority, authenticity, and narrative reliability. We will hear from a variety of first-person narrators with voices that range from the ordinary to the strange, even unnatural, and who speak to us from the underground, the jail cell, the happily ever after, and beyond. We will explore the relationship between various types of nineteenth- through twentieth-century fiction, including the bildungsroman, the Gothic tale, and the detective story, and the nonfictional genres of autobiography, memoir, and confession. And we will ask: who speaks—how do they know what they know and why should we believe them? What does it mean to be both the subject and object of one’s own inquiry? Is it possible to know one’s own mind? What about the minds of others? How might the representation of selfhood in fiction reflect the fictional structure of selfhood in reality? Our primary texts will include the essays, short stories, novellas, and novels by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Agatha Christie, Ralph Ellison, Shirley Jackson, Paul Auster, Alice Munro, and more. Secondary readings will include philosophical and theoretical texts by writers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Frantz Fanon, and Michel Foucault.

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THH 175