

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION, CIVIL RIGHTS, VIETNAM, GAY LIBERATION, IMMIGRATION

The literary genre of the memoir has never been as ubiquitous—or as subject to falsification—as it is today, but many of the memoirs published over the past several decades specialize in confession and dysfunction, seemingly celebrating addiction, abuse, eating disorders, depression, and other aspects of personal and family life that previous generations of memoir writers would never have dared to discuss. While perhaps useful for helping us gain insight into certain aspects of the human condition, most of those types of memoirs are oddly ahistorical, and do not place their authors in the context of any particular historical moment or movement. Thus, what we learn from them is often limited, and fleeting.

There is another kind of memoir, however, the kind that is written specifically because the writer found himself or herself present and indeed involved in some of the most important social, economic, and political issues of his or her time. Those are the memoirs we will be reading for this course. As noted above, they focus on the Great Depression of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, the national trauma of the war in Vietnam, the gay liberation movement, and America as a nation of immigrants.

In addition to reading them in order to assess the degree to which they illuminate a particular place and time, we will also consider the process of organizing or constructing memory into a coherent narrative stream. How much is really “remembered”? How much is invented? To what extent is memoir reliable as “history”? To what extent is any allegedly “factual” historical writing reliable as history?

Finally, we will discuss the degree to which issues of race, class, ethnicity, and gender are either explicit or implicit in the various authors’ interpretations of events. The memoirs will be supplemented by letters (also part of the so-called “life writings” genre of which memoir is but one type), commercial and documentary films, and optional selections from a history text, highly recommended for those whose historical background may be weak.