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American Studies 050:300:01
Topics in American Studies:
The Memoir as History
Fall 2008
Tuesdays 9:15 a.m.--12:15 p.m.
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Or By Appointment

THE AMERICAN MEMOIR AS HISTORY:
THE GREAT DEPRESSION, CIVIL RIGHTS, VIETNAM, and AIDS

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 few 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, and the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic. 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. What is “truth” in memoir? How much is really “remembered”? How much is invented? To what extent is memoir reliable as “history”? To what extent is any historical writing reliable as history? 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 additional handouts to help you with the historical context of the memoirs and their authors.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS ASSIGNMENTS

MEMOIR WRITING: TRUTH, LIES, AND OPRAH

September 2: Course overview and introduction to James Frey and [A Million Little Pieces](#)

September 9: James Frey: [A Million Little Pieces](#)—entire
Video clip: Frey on “Oprah”

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

September 16: Robert S. McElvaine, ed.: [Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man](#), pp. 33-229.

Film: "Life in the Thirties"

September 23: Russell Baker: Growing Up—entire
Film: "Riding the Rails"

September 30: Adele Robertson: Orchard, A Memoir—entire
Great Depression Segment Wrap-Up
Introduction to Civil Rights Segment: Film: "Voices of Civil Rights"
Start Lewis, Walking with the Wind (See October 21)

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

October 7: Melba Pattillo Beals: Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High—entire
Continue with Lewis, Walking with the Wind (See October 21)
Film: "Mississippi, America"

October 14: Anne Moody: Coming of Age in Mississippi—entire
Continue with Lewis, Walking with the Wind
Film: Spike Lee: "4 Little Girls"

October 21: John Lewis: Walking with the Wind—entire
(Note: Lewis is a 500-page memoir; you would be well served to begin it early, I have blocked it out for you above. You will be expected to have completed it for this class and to be able to demonstrate that fact in class discussion.)
Civil Rights Segment Wrap-Up

VIETNAM

October 28: Philip Caputo: Rumor of War—entire
Film: "Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam"
Mid-term Paper Due--Details to be Announced

November 4: Le Ly Hayslip: When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnam Woman's Journey from War to Peace—entire

AIDS IN AMERICA

November 11: Mark Doty: Heaven's Coast—Entire

November 18: Abraham Verghese: My Own Country—entire
AIDS Segment Wrap-Up
Review of Protocols for Oral Presentations in December

November 25: No Class ("Tuesday is Thursday")

December 2: In-Class Presentations of Final Papers

December 9: In-Class Presentations of Final Papers

COURSE EXPECTATIONS RE ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION, PREPARATION

FINAL RESEARCH PAPER REQUIREMENTS

GRADING

This class is run as a seminar, and as such, attendance and full participation are mandatory and will constitute a significant part of your grade. There is lots of reading; you are expected to come to class having completed it. We will begin some of our class meetings with an in-class response paper, wherein I will ask you to write briefly about your reaction to that week's reading, most often in the form of noting what particularly struck or impressed you about the book. These response papers will not be individually graded, but will be read by me and will often be used as the jumping-off point for our class discussions.

You will be required to complete two papers for the course, a 7-10 page mid-term paper, due October 28, and a 15-20 page final paper, due December 9. The mid-term paper will focus on the readings you will do for the Great Depression and Civil Rights segments, and will involve discussing the issues of "truth" and "history" in those historical memoirs. More detailed instruction regarding this paper will follow. The final paper may be either a) a piece of historical research on one of the areas we have covered, which may include not only politics and economics, but also art, literature, music, culture, etc., b) an analysis of 4-5 additional memoirs from one of our areas (Great Depression, Civil Rights, Vietnam, AIDS), or c) an analysis of 4-5 memoirs from another aspect of American history of the period 1930—2008.

We will discuss possible ideas for your papers at our September 16 class. Paper topics must be approved in advance; you should give me a brief written statement of your topic at our class on **September 23**, and I will approve or suggest modifications at our class on **September 30**. All papers will be due on **December 9**, whether you present on that day or on December 2.

Grades will be based on a non-formulaic combination of attendance and meaningful class participation, the mid-term paper, and the final paper, including your presentation thereof. There will be no final exam per se.

REQUIRED BOOKS

(Available in the Cook/Douglass Co-op, also all currently in print in paperback form and available on line)

James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*

Russell Baker, *Growing Up*

Robert S. McElvaine, ed., *Down and Out in the Great Depression*

Adele Robertson, *Orchard, A Memoir*

Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*

Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*

John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*

Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War*

Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*

Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast*

Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country*

