COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to literary nonfiction through the study of the memoir. The subject matter of memoir seems straightforward: the high and low points in a life rendered significant by historical and cultural positioning. But by choosing to tell their own story, and by choosing how to tell it, memoirists suggest the genre fulfills deeper and more urgent needs. A closer look shows that the memoir is often motivated by the need to map the contours of a “lost time” or a “lost” relationship. A portrait of a life derailed by politics. A record of a culture supplanted by another. Chronicles of youth and identity formation. In such summaries we glimpse a vanished past, a need to record historically and permanently the vast changes that can occur in a single lifetime and within a single identity.

Truth claims plague any work of nonfiction, and especially the memoir. We are inclined to hold the memoir to strict standards: we expect a “true story” to be true. But memoir inherits all the imperfections and ambiguities of memory and subjectivity. Can truth be an absolute value when it is informed by subjective experience? It becomes apparent rather quickly that other ethical dilemmas are inherent in this genre. Does the confessional memoir violate the right-to-privacy of characters caught in the story? Or is there an overarching professional, moral, social, or even historical responsibility to “tell all”? And what of omissions and embellishments? To what degree does a memoirist have the license to skew? How far should memory and perception be trusted when they are apt to jumble timelines or exaggerate physical details or misrepresent real personalities?

While all memoirs have to deal with these issues, there are few formal requirements of the medium. In touring four lives set in diverse cultural contexts, we will gain an appreciation for the inventiveness and creativity of the genre by studying the techniques that these memoirists employ. In addition, this course involves the participation of a practitioner of the memoir genre, Aria Minu-Sepehr, who will lead discussions and contribute his expertise in relevant units, thereby helping us to understand the practical and theoretical complexities of writing in this genre.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

All writing intensive courses use writing as a significant approach to learning. ENG 445 asks students to:

• Develop reading and critical thinking abilities through written response;
• Explore in writing the conventions and techniques of the memoir as a genre;
• Effectively evaluate and explain their responses to memoir texts;
• Develop an appreciation for memoir as a literary art form.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*
Gerard Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*
Alexandra Fuller, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*
Selected memoir essays (will be provided as pdfs)
**Graded Requirements**
This course is designed around three independent units and 100 possible points. A substantial portion of the course grade goes to the students’ participation in on-line discussion forums. Students will be quizzed after most assigned readings to check for comprehension and timely progress. Three papers will require students to display their analytical skills and their in-depth understanding of the material covered. Proportionally, these requirements break down as:

- Four Quiz grades (5 quizzes, lowest score dropped) – 20% (5% each)
- Unit 1 Paper – 20%
- Unit 2 Paper – 20%
- Unit 3 Paper – 25%
- Discussion forum participation – 15%

**Accessibility**
Accommodations are collaborative efforts between students, faculty and Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). Students with accommodations approved through SSD are responsible for contacting the faculty member in charge of the course prior to or during the first week of the term to discuss accommodations. Students who believe they are eligible for accommodations but who have not yet obtained approval through SSD should contact SSD immediately at 737-4098.

**Honesty and Civility**
A plagiarized essay will receive an F and a report will be filed with the Student Conduct and Mediation Program. Two reports at OSU can lead to suspension or expulsion. Behaviors that are disruptive to learning will not be tolerated and will be referred to the Student Conduct and Mediation Program for disciplinary action. In keeping with federal law, behaviors that create a hostile, offensive, or intimidating environment based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, marital status or sexual orientation will be referred to the Affirmative Action Office.

**Statement of Expectations for Student Conduct**
[http://oregonstate.edu/admin/stucon/achon.htm](http://oregonstate.edu/admin/stucon/achon.htm)

**Course Evaluation**
We encourage you to engage in the course evaluation process each term – online, of course. The evaluation form will be available toward the end of each term, and you will be sent instructions by Ecampus. You will login to “Student Online Services” to respond to the online questionnaire. The results on the form are anonymous and are not tabulated until after grades are posted.