

THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IN THE FIRST PERSON: MEMOIR AS THE LITERATURE OF WITNESS

EMERSON COLLEGE

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Office hours: Mondays/Wednesdays 11:00 - 12:00; Wednesday 4:00 - 5:00.

This course is predicated on the idea that a writer is, above and beyond all else, one who bears witness to his or her time. While a memoirist does not claim the apparent objectivity of a historian, the view afforded by literary artists writing memoir can often provide a more palpable sense of the impact and consequence of events than the historian's necessarily dispassionate perspective.

The course is, above all, a conversation. Our aims — and therefore our “study questions” — will remain the same from book to book:

What do we learn from this book about

- a. its events as antecedents to subsequent events and to our own time?
- b. human behavior?
- c. the way social, political, economic, and historical forces shape individuals and vice-versa?
- d. the craft of autobiographical writing?
- e. ourselves, i.e. our interests, antagonisms, political positions, tastes?

REQUIRED MEMOIRS:

- Graves, Robert: *Good-bye To All That*
- Mandelstam, Nadezdha: *Hope Against Hope*
- Balakian, Peter: *Black Dog of Fate*
- Levi, Primo: *Survival in Auschwitz*
- Haffner, Sebastian: *Defying Hitler*
- Baldwin, James: *The Fire Next Time*
- Shadid, Anthony: *House of Stone*
- Zhu Xiao Di, *Thirty Years in a Red House*
- Fremont, Helen: *After Long Silence*
- Grende, Florence: *The Butcher's Daughter*
- Alexiyevich, Svetlana; *Voices from Chernobyl*

RECOMMENDED MEMOIRS:

- Alexander, Meena: *Fault Lines* (new & rev. ed.)
- Birkerts, Sven: *My Sky Blue Trades*
- Cannetti, Elias: *Memoirs* (3-in-1 volume.)

- Carroll, James: *An American Requiem*
- Coetzee, J.M.: *Boyhood*
- Collins, Julia: *My Father's War*
- cummings, e.e.: *The Enormous Room*
- DeSalvo, Louise: *Chasing Ghosts*
- Frister, Roman: *The Cap, or The Price of A Life*
- Gates, Henry Louis: *Colored People*
- Gibbs, Philip: *Now It Can Be Told*
- Gorky, Maxim: *Childhood*
- Guehenno, Jean: *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944*
- Hoffman, Eva: *Lost in Translation*
- Klima, Ivan: *My Crazy Century*
- Kotlowitz, Robert: *Before Their Time*
- Lewis, John: *Walking with the Wind*
- Mathabane, Mark: *Kaffir Boy*
- Moody, Anne: *Coming of Age in Mississippi*
- Mura, David: *Turning Japanese*
- Nafisi, Azar: *Reading Lolita in Tehran*
- Naipaul, V.S.: *Finding the Center*
- Noah, Trevor: *Born A Crime*
- Obama, Barack: *Dreams from My Father*
- Ondaatje, Michael: *Running in the Family*
- Orr, Gregory: *The Blessing*
- Sands, Philippe: *East West Street*
- Satrapi, Marjane: *Persepolis (I&II)*
- Schwartz, Mimi: *Good Neighbors, Bad Times*
- \_\_\_\_\_: *When History Is Personal*
- Simon, Andrea: *Bashert*
- Soyinka, Wole: *Ake*
- Ung, Loung: *First They Killed My Father*
- Watt, Dan: *History Lessons*
- Weigl, Bruce: *The Circle of Hanh*
- Wolff, Tobias: *In Pharaoh's Army*

## EXPECTATIONS:

Because each of us is crucial to this conversation, you will be expected to come prepared to be articulate about your response to each book and, indeed, anxious to join in the conversation with others, raising questions, offering opinions, quoting from the text to support your position (or just to point out what especially moved or delighted you!)

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that in a large group, a good conversation depends more on listening than talking. In other words, come with things to say, points you want to make, questions you want to raise, but understand that we cannot exhaust the potential significance of any of these works in the short time we have, and remember that conversations are living things that find their own shape as they proceed.

## CLASSROOM PROCEDURES:

Prior to each class, someone will be scheduled to present the next evening's book in context. This presentation should be 30 to 45 minutes in length, and I am happy to guide and support you in your preparation for the presentation. Clearly you are expected to do research, which should include the work's historical context, biographical material, critical responses to the work. Your presentation may be a lecture, an outline with handouts and questions for discussion, a powerpoint or web-based presentation, or a multi-media approach.

Someone will also be assigned each week to take careful minutes of the discussion. This will accomplish two things (at least!):

1. It will serve as a starting point for the next class. Some period of time, not to exceed 30 minutes, will be devoted, if we agree it is needed, to finishing up the previous week's conversation. We have all had the experience of riding home after class, mulling things that were said, and wishing we had said the brilliant thing that is only occurring to us now (damn!) So this will be a chance to say those things or raise any questions that have since occurred to you.
2. The minutes will serve as a way to track themes across books, a way to identify those forces and ideas animating the twentieth century and continuing into our own.

## THE REQUIREMENTS:

Each student will be assigned one author/book to present to the class. For every class, you are required to write a short response to the reading on the class blog. This informal writing ought to raise questions that will help animate our class discussion.

The semester will culminate in a 20 page research paper on some aspect of the course material, whether an in-depth study of a particular author/book and his times, or a well-researched discussion of the social, cultural, and political forces at work across a number of the books we've studied. (I am happy to help you focus and develop this final project.)

## THE RULES:

No more than one class absence is permitted without a prior discussion with me. I am flexible and respectful when it comes to the needs of adults with busy lives, so if you let me know something that's truly more important than class on a

given Monday, I will probably excuse you and suggest an alternative, such as a conference. Please notify me by email of ANY absence or expected lateness prior to class. More than two absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

#### EQUAL ACCESS:

Emerson College is committed to providing equal access to its academic programs and social activities for all qualified students with disabilities. While upholding this commitment, we require all Emerson students to meet the high standards of achievement that are essential to the College's programs and services. To advance these dual aims, the College will provide reasonable accommodations to disabled students who request accommodations through the College's Disability Services Office (DSO), if the DSO determines that accommodations are both medically necessary and reasonable. Please note that a requested accommodation will only be approved as 'reasonable' if it does not compromise any essential requirements of a course. Students who wish to request a disability accommodation must submit their request to the DSO, and not to faculty, since only the DSO is authorized to approve or deny any requests for accommodations. College employees and student's family members cannot request accommodations on a student's behalf. Rather, students who wish to request accommodations must themselves contact the DSO since Emerson's philosophy is that its students are independent and self determined and students with disabilities—like nondisabled students have control over their lives here at Emerson and are ultimately responsible for making their own decisions. Students who know at the start of a semester that they will need accommodations must submit their accommodation requests to the DSO within the first two weeks of the semester. If a student becomes ill or disabled during the course of a semester, or discovers after the start of a semester that he or she needs a disability accommodation, he or she is encouraged to submit his or her request to the DSO as soon as possible since the process of approving accommodations takes time, and approved accommodations will not be granted retroactively. The Associate Director for Disability Services can be reached at: 617-824-8592, [dso@emerson.edu](mailto:dso@emerson.edu), 5th Floor 216 Tremont Street."

#### DIVERSITY STATEMENT:

Every student in this class will be honored and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Students will be treated fairly regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identification, disability, socioeconomic status, or national identity. Issues of diversity may be a part of class discussion, assigned material, and projects. The instructor will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with the course instructor. Should this prove too difficult, or you find doing so ineffective, you should contact the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at [617-824-8528](tel:617-824-8528) or by email at [diversity\\_inclusion@emerson.edu](mailto:diversity_inclusion@emerson.edu)

#### PLAGIARISM POLICY:

It is the responsibility of all Emerson students to know and adhere to the College's policy on plagiarism. If you have any questions concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in this course, you should speak to your instructor. The penalties for plagiarism vary up to expulsion from the college.

#### CLASS PARTICIPATION

Class participation counts as 30% of your final grade. It is defined as taking an active part in the conversation we have in each class about the works under consideration, which begins with being prepared for the class. Perhaps most importantly, it means discussing the texts in a manner that helps others learn as well. Respect, tolerance for others' opinions, and good conversational manners are also required.

#### CLASS DISCUSSIONS:

1/16 Introduction to the course  
1/23 Graves  
1/30 Mandelstam 1  
2/6 Mandelstam 2  
2/13 Balakian  
2/20 Levi  
2/27 Haffner  
3/13 Baldwin  
3/20 Shadid  
4/3 Zhu Xiao Di  
4/10 Fremont  
4/17 Grende  
4/24 Alexiyevich  
5/1 Review — "ghostbusting"