Memoir: The Art and Craft of Memory
Course Code: CNF 58 W
Instructor: Lewis Buzbee
buzbee@usfca.edu

Course Summary

This course will guide both beginning and experienced writers through the process of capturing life as it is lived, and making your memoir not merely a record of that life, but rather a telling that will resonate with readers. In the end, a memoir is about not a single life but all lives. To move beyond expression into communication, we will study the craft of scene and compressed narration, the management of time, and, of course, the precision of our prose. We will also study the more slippery aspects of memory—how to investigate and solidify our memories and how to strengthen our “memory muscles.” To inform our writing, we will read two brilliant memoirs, Frank Conroy’s *Stop-Time* and Alexandra Fuller’s *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*. Whether you’re writing short essays or a book-length narrative, our reading, coupled with weekly writing assignments or reading responses, will offer insights into structure, the creation of vivid worlds, and the use of research. Students will submit one 20 to 30 page chapter or stand-alone essay for a full-class workshop. At the end of the course, you’ll have a finely shaped piece of memoir and a new set of strategies for going forward.

Required Reading

*Stop-Time*, Frank Conroy
Paperback, Penguin Books
978-0140044461

*Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Alexandra Fuller
Paperback, Random House
978-0375758997

For the first week, we’ll begin with reading the first 20 pages of each of these two great but very different memoirs. Then for the next two weeks we’ll read *Stop-Time* straight through, and for the two weeks after that, we’ll read all of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*. Every other week—see the Weekly Schedule—students will offer guided reading responses to these books, to help us understand the craft strategies these writers employ and to help us gauge our own approaches to similar material.
OUR ONLINE WEEK

Weekly reading and writing assignments are posted by 5:00 p.m. PST on Fridays for the first six weeks.

Weekly reading responses and writing assignments are due by 5:00 p.m. PST on Thursdays for the first six weeks.

Workshop submissions are due by 8:00 p.m. PST on Fridays, beginning Week 7. We’ll set the workshop schedule Week 2, so you’ll know when you’ll be submitting. 4 students will submit each week.

Workshop critiques are due by the following Thursday of each week by 8:00 p.m. PST. Though 4 writers will submit, each student will be responsible for offering critiques of only 2 of those 4 submissions in small workshop groups.

Live Zoom video conferences are offered each Wednesday from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. PST. For each Zoom session I’ll post questions to guide our discussions, but we will always save time to field student questions, whether about craft, writing practice, or publishing. We will also offer time for those writers who’ve been workshopped that week to ask questions and continue the discussion. Participation in the Zoom sessions is recommended but not required.

Announcements. I’ll post regular announcements, at least once a week, which will also reach you as emails. Here I’ll offer information about weekly small groups and workshops, and other reminders.

Craft Lectures, Weekly Reading, Discussion Questions. Each craft lecture will be tied explicitly to that week’s reading and discussion questions. The lectures are intended to offer students a frame of reference for the reading, and to help focus us on the craft as we read. I’ll pose several questions each week, though you are only required to respond to one of those questions.

Weekly Writing Assignments. Each week you’ll write up to 750 words using a prompt tied to that week’s craft lecture and reading assignment. The purpose of these assignments is to offer possibilities for the work that might not be found otherwise. You’ll each write a 150-word response to the assignments of those in your small group of 4 or so. I’ll comment on each assignment as well.
Workshop Submissions. Manuscript workshops will begin Week 7. Each of you will submit one manuscript of up to 5,000 words, about 20 to 25 pages. For this course we’ll focus on the beginnings of our memoirs, whether brand new material or revisions. Workshop submissions must be in a Word doc, double-spaced in either 12-point Courier or Palatino, and must include name and title, page numbers, and a brief introductory note (less than a page).

Workshop Critiques. The ideal workshop is both rigorous and generous. We do need to help one another see what’s not working or is confusing in a manuscript, but the purpose of a workshop isn’t to judge the writing or the writer. Our goal is, in the end, to offer the writer possibilities for the next draft, ideas and strategies he or she could not think of from the solitude of the desk. Our task is to open new vistas rather than shut them down.

I also believe that the most benefit a writer gets from workshop is when discussing the work of fellow writers. When you critique someone else’s manuscript, you’re honing your own critical skills and making yourself a smarter writer. Participation in workshop discussion, and in written critiques, is a vital tool for improving your own work.

And respect, of course, is mandatory. It’s not up to the group to say whether or not we “like” a work, but honoring the writer’s intentions for that work, help the writer move toward the best possible version of it.

Rigor; generosity; respect

Grade Options and Requirements

* No Grade Requested (NGR)
  This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

* Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  Score will be determined by student’s participation and completion of assignments.

* Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  Written work, as assigned by the instructor, will determine a student’s grade.

If you’re taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading
status at any point before the final class meeting by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Writing Assignments: 25%
Reading Discussions: 25%
Workshop Submissions: 25%
Workshop Participation: 25%

I base grades solely on timeliness, and evidence of engagement. It’s all about doing the work.

Weekly Schedule

Week One:
Lecture: Memoir vs. Memory: Where to Begin?
Reading: First 20 pages of Stop-Time and Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight.
Writing Assignment: Describe Your Book or Essays in 3 Pages

Week Two:
Lecture: Scene: Animating the World
Reading: finish Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight
Reading Discussion: Fuller’s Use of Scene
Sign up for Workshop Schedule

Week Three:
Lecture: Compressed Narration: Stories in Motion
Reading: Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight
Writing Assignment: Translate one of your longer scenes into compressed narration

Week Four:
Lecture: Memory: Diving Deep and Surfacing
Reading: finish Stop-Time
Reading Discussion: Conroy and Memory

Week Five:
Lecture: It’s All in the Details: Sensory Details in Memoir
Reading: Stop-Time
Writing Assignment: “The Memory Thief”
Mini-Lecture: How to Write a Helpful Critique

Week Six:
Lecture: Time and Again: Managing Time in Memoir
Writing Assignment: Cover a Long Span of Time in 750 words

Week Seven:
Lecture: Landscape and Memory
First Workshop!

Week Eight:
Lecture: Not All About Me: Research and the Memoir
Workshop

Week Nine:
Lecture: Structure and the Memoir
Workshop

Week Ten:
Lecture: What Comes Next? Where to Now?
Workshop