

English 461 Senior Seminar

Dr. Susan DeRosa

SPRING 2012 Wednesday 4:00-6:45 p.m.

“Memoir: Exploring the Private/Public ‘I’”

Memoir is a report to others from foreign territory: the territory of the writer, of the self, of an “I.” When I say memoir, I mean put to the page carefully arranged. I do mean a true story, unadorned, but always laid down with the understanding that memory can be faulty, that images fade, that the “I” itself is a construction, a kind of fiction, only capable of representing part of the writer at any given time.

Bill Roorbach, *Writing Life Stories*

The authority of memory is a personal confirmation of selfhood. To write one’s life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical, for a memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks its narrative form and also grasps the life-of-the-times as no political treatise can.... If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us. That is a scary political fact.

Patricia Hampl, *Memorial and Imagination*

The genre of memoir is complex and contested. James Frey’s “memoir” *A Million Little Pieces* led to heated discussion on how we define this genre and how we think about issues of truth, memory, and imagination. While some believe memoir is a mere transcription of reality or “the facts” about a writer’s past experiences, most memoirists would say it’s not quite that simple. Memoirists argue that memory fades and truth is subjective, and writing is an exploration of those fluid constructs—and of the writer’s self, the private and the public “I.” In this seminar, we’ll challenge myths about memoir, a genre described by some critics as the art of “navel gazing,” a kind of confessional or crisis writing—the emotional train wrecks of writer’s lives at which readers may gawk. Some memoirists contend that memoir may be read as acts of resistance, personal/public discourse that disrupts official narratives of history, politics, the status quo—of “Truth.” We’ll examine memoirs as genres of exploration—exploration of self, identity, place and as genres of disruption. We’ll look at representations of self in memoir—the private/public “I”—as they are influenced by nationality, ethnicity, gender, geography and cultural factors. In doing so, we’ll examine how memoir may invite alternate versions of histories and truths to be told, the memories, stories, and voices that otherwise might remain silenced.

