

Volume I-Issue 2

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Journal of the Montana Writing Project

the Art and Craft of Memoir

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Assessing Writing

Submission Deadline: March 1

Publication Date: April 1

Figuring out how to handle assessment is one of the most frustrating and important tasks writing teachers are entrusted with. If we are to help our students improve, it is vital we know the strengths and weaknesses of the writers we work with. We also have to know what kind of progress they are making, and we have to be able to clearly communicate all this information to the students, to their parents, and to a variety of others who have a stake in how they are progressing. What methods have been effective in assessing your students' writing? What leads to improvement? How do you communicate with students and others about their progress? How is your assessment connected to final evaluation and the grading you have to do? How have you utilized, or justified distancing yourself from, many of the assessment tools like portfolios, rubrics, computer-based assessment, district writing assessments, or the variety of others common in schools? How do you ensure that assessment occurs throughout the writing process and not just at the end when figuring out a final evaluation? How are initiatives like Indian Education for All and No Child Left Behind influencing your assessment? What approaches or ideas are not being considered, that should be, in our current systems? We welcome submissions that deal with any aspect of writing assessment. The following ongoing features are possible ways to contribute:

The Practice of Teaching: As you work to teach writing, what methods get results? You might build an article from a demonstration lesson or a successful classroom unit. Reflect on what pedagogical practices have proven effective and share some ideas or strategies we can put into play in our own classrooms. The length of the submissions for this section could vary wildly. They might be brief pieces of no more a paragraph or two that outline a successful lesson but might also materialize as lengthier pieces that explain a whole unit and give some theoretical background or support for your work.

Fresh Insight: What is happening in education that you feel you must say something about? Use this as a forum to share your views on writing education. There are many things going on at the classroom level up to the national level that we as teachers are thinking about, wanting to change, or are hopeful or angry about. This is a platform to expand and articulate some of those ideas. What important issues are those around us (or are we ourselves) not thinking enough about?

Teachers as Writers: Amid the daily chaos of teaching, what personal writing have you been able to do? What are you ready to publish? What better way to encourage all of us to continue to be writers than to offer one another some of the work we are doing. Submissions of any genre are welcome.

Book reviews: What titles have you found useful when working on writing? Consider reviewing one of your favorite texts to give others an idea of the content and approach they can expect from the author. We'd be especially interested in fairly new releases that others may not yet be familiar with.

Original Photography: Share images from your classroom, professional development, or photos that complement any of your writing submissions. Images should be sent as 300 dpi image files. Anyone who appears in the photo should be identified, along with any other relevant caption information such as a brief explanation of what is depicted, the photographer's name and an approximate date the photo was taken.

Announcements/Upcoming Events: Please pass on any information about upcoming events or opportunities or any other information that would be of interest and use to the Montana Writing Project Community.

And of course there is always be room for quality work that doesn't fit the categories above or the current thematic issue. Please consider sharing your ideas, experience, and expertise.

Upcoming issues:

Spoken Word/ Slam Poetry

Submission Deadline: June 1

Publication Date: July 1

Multimodal Literacy

Submission Deadline: September 1

Publication Date: October 1

Submission Guidelines:

Send any submissions to **montana.writing.project@gmail.com**.

Manuscripts are only accepted in digital form, saved as an RTF or Microsoft Word file.

In general, manuscripts shouldn't exceed 2,500 words.

Please list your name, address, academic affiliation, and e-mail address on your manuscript.

Upcoming Writing Project Events

As you think about your professional development plans, we would like to announce Montana Writing Project's upcoming offerings:

We will host two spring Youth Creative Writing Workshops, one for middle school and one for high school students (March through May, 2007) at the University of Montana. Remember that we have a model for developing youth writing camps that is available to help any MWP Teacher-Consultant who wishes to sponsor a youth writing project—contact caroline.simms@mso.umt.edu for more information.

MWP's 3rd Annual Rural Conference on Writing Education is scheduled for April 21, 2007 at MSU College of Technology in Great Falls. The conference theme is "Responding to the Challenges of Access, Relevance and Diversity: Teaching Writing in Montana." Conference highlights include Debra Magpie Earling, author of *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewa* as keynote speaker and workshop presenter as well as a strand on implementing Indian Education for All. All MWP teacher-consultants are invited to submit proposals to present at the workshop. Contact Caroline Simms at the above email by February 28th, 2007. The conference is open to all. Come renew contacts with old MWP friends and bring new friends along. Registration will begin in January.

Three intensive invitational Summer Institutes will be offered Summer 2007:

- Blackfeet Community College Browning, MT June 4th -22nd
Site Directors: Laurie E. Smith-Small Waisted Bear and Woody Kipp
- University of Montana Missoula, MT June 18th – July 13th
Site Directors: Heather E. Bruce, Claudia Crase, and David Christensen
- Billings Senior High School Billings, MT June 18th – July 13th
Site Directors: Rina Moog, Casey Olson, and Lorrie Henrie-Koski

Application materials due March 30, 2007 may be obtained by contacting Caroline Simms. Direct questions regarding Summer Institute participation should be brought to the Director, Heather E. Bruce or any of the site leaders.

We again plan to offer a Creative Writing Open Institute at Lubrecht Retreat Center in Greenough, MT July 16th-20th.. Robert Stubblefield, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Montana and Chris Dombrowski, a poet and Professor of Writing also at the University will lead the institute. Information is available from Caroline Simms.

Christa Umphrey and Dave Christensen received a grant to support teachers in development of strategies for teaching multi-modal literacies. Format and dates of the inservice are yet to be determined. Participating teachers will receive a modest stipend.

Direct your inquiries to Dave Christensen at christensens@montana.com.

Several teachers have received grant monies to support teacher inquiry study groups. These include two study groups to work on issues involved with assessing writing, one to lay the foundation for establishing a Montana Writing Project Summer Institute in Billings, another to explore alternatives to the current grading system in the University of Montana's ENEX 101 curriculum, one that aims to spend time together to envision new possibilities for writing instruction and share instructional practices that get kids writing and keep kids writing in meaningful ways, and the final inquiry group will uncover the relationship between reading and writing by investigating the question: How does the teaching of writing and the teaching of reading support one another's effectiveness and grow more literate students?

In October, Wendy Z. Warren and Christa Umphrey participated in a two-week online inservice discussion with representatives from more than twenty NWP sites around the country. Wendy and Christa hope to use the information to develop MWP sponsored school-based inservice programs that meet local needs around the state. You can help them by emailing them with topics for inservices that might be in demand in your school or district. Christa's email is christabel.umphrey@umontana.edu and Wendy's is wendyzwarren@yahoo.com.

Laurie E. Smith-Small Waisted Bear and Lisa Waller, MWP teacher-consultants received an OPI "Ready to Go" grant to implement Indian Education for All. This spring they will offer weekend leadership training for twenty teachers at Hellgate High School in Missoula. The institute gives priority registration to Hellgate and MCPS teachers. Interested others should contact Laurie at laurieesmith@hotmail.com in case openings are available.

Heather E. Bruce, Director
Caroline Simms, Program Coordinator

Become a Montana Writing Project Teacher Consultant
Attend a Summer Institute

Montana Writing Project An Institute for Reading, Writing, Questioning, and Reflecting

Montana is a member of the National Writing Project network and it operates under three primary premises:

- ❖ Teachers as Literacy Leaders
- ❖ Teachers as Researchers
- ❖ Teachers as Writers

The Montana Writing Project Summer Institute is an intensive, four-week program where participants:

- ❖ Participate in the writing process
- ❖ Interpret and apply current research in best reading and writing practices
- ❖ Write with published authors and teachers
- ❖ Hone writing talents and leadership skills
- ❖ Develop effective literacy workshops for professional presentation
- ❖ Network with Writing Projects across the nation

Application Information:

Participants may earn seven graduate credits in English by paying a \$135 recording fee. Any educator may apply to participate in the Montana Writing Project. Applications should reach the Director by April 30; however, some flexibility exists in this deadline. School districts often pay the program fee (Title I funds may be used), but participants may choose to assume that cost. Participants also receive a professional library valued at over \$200.

Dates & Locations of the three Summer Institutes:

University of Montana
Missoula, Montana
April 21, 2007
June 18-July 13, 2007
October 18-19, 2007

Billings Senior High School
Billings, Montana
April 21, 2007
June 18-July 13, 2007
October 18-19, 2007

Blackfeet Community College
Browning, Montana
April 21, 2007
June 4-22, 2007

To request an application, scholarship information, or financial assistance details for self-sponsorship, contact:

Heather E. Bruce, Director
Department of English, LA 133
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
Phone: 406-243-2138/Fax: 406-243-2556:
heather.bruce@umontana.edu

A Rationale for the Real: Why Memoir Matters

Christa Umphrey

"Where else will our students learn to pay attention to their lives in this way, crafting themselves into certain kinds of persons by choosing what has been important to them, deciding what matters? [...] Is this learning or is this paying attention to life? Is this learning or living? Does it belong to the space inside the school walls or out in the world? Do such questions even make sense? If not, why have we tolerated the distinctions so long, and why do they persist in our minds and in our practice?"

~Randy Bomer

Tell me a story. This may be one of our oldest requests and most enduring desires. Our earliest Native cultures used stories to explain the origins of things and pass on experiences that would help young people know how they should act in the world. Today's society spends millions of dollars to watch narratives unfold with polished dialogue, carefully crafted camera angles, high definition images, and surround sound that engulfs us. Though the shift in delivery may be dramatic, we remain a society enchanted by our stories.

And we also remain a society shaped by our stories. Although it may be very rare to find places where teaching by story, from one person to the next, is done as explicitly as was in the past, the influence of stories is as strong as it was when oral culture reigned. Stories are powerful. They spark our imagination and offer us both hope and possibilities. Competing narratives surround us, from the latest movies, to popular television shows, to the success stories of famous musicians and athletes. They have affected how we think about ourselves, how we filter our reality, and how we dream. Both consciously and unconsciously what we want—from simple material possessions to whole lifestyles—and even what we believe is possible is influenced by the narratives we are exposed to every day. Through the research for his book on storytelling in the age of mass culture, Robert Fulford concluded, "Stories are how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves, how we often do all three at once. They are the juncture where facts and feelings meet. And for those reasons, they are central to civilization." It seems clear that even as the medium changes, our attraction to, and ultimately dependence upon, these stories remains. All stories influence what we desire and what we

believe, but when we know the stories are true, the effect can be even more powerful.

Stories about how others have succeeded and struggled in the world give younger people realistic ideas about the paths they may want to take or avoid. When we stop and ask others about their lives, the experiences they've had, and the lessons they've learned, we gather information that may help us guide our own lives. This approach echoes the traditional Native American model of education, which Vine Deloria, Jr reminds us occurred, "by examples and not as a process of indoctrination." He explains that the "elders are the best living examples of what the end product of education and life experiences should be. We sometimes forget that life is exceedingly hard and that none of us accomplishes everything we could possibly do or even many of the things we intended to do. The elder exemplifies both the good and bad experiences of life, and in witnessing their failures as much as their successes we are cushioned in our despair of disappointment and bolstered in our exuberance of success." In guiding students into our communities to find their elders, seek out their stories, and help them write or share them we can facilitate these important intergenerational connections.

Jon Franklin, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his own nonfiction writing, also speaks of the value of learning and retelling others' stories. In his book *Writing for Story* he explains, "Negative lessons are helpful, up to a point, and they're part and parcel of the trial and error learning process. But [...] a citizen can easily stumble through life accumulating long lists of things not to do and still not get a clear grasp of what he should do." As students talk to their elders, they are bound to find some of examples of what not to do. But, they can also find people who made choices they admire. They can seek out those who have lives they'd like to emulate and ask them how they got there. As



Christa has taught memoir writing in high school and college composition classes. This summer she helped her grandmother write her memoirs. Someday, when all of her hours aren't occupied by running a daycare, finishing a library degree, and keeping up with her own three children, she plans to actually do some memoir writing of her own.

Franklin explains, "One of the best methods to teach positive lessons while entertaining at the same time is to write stories about how people successfully cope with the world, endure, and even sometimes win. This is teaching by example in the finest sense..." In broadening the walls of our classroom to include our local communities, in teaching students how to collect others' experiences and turn them into stories, we are taking some of the best pieces of the traditional education Deloria speaks of and infusing them into our modern-day education.

In that modern-day educational system we are working in, teaching our students to write well is the job we are all hired to do. Still, there is no reason we shouldn't figure out how to do that job in a way that builds community both within our classrooms and larger communities and empowers students to take control of their lives. Helping students figure out the story of their lives is one of our most important tasks. Helping them learn and share the stories of those around them is one of the most effective ways to prepare them to complete that task. We have an obligation to help students bring not only their stories in to being, but also equip them to tell the stories of their families and communities. In some instances, if we don't record our stories, no one will. But possibly even more frightening is the fact that in many cases, if we don't do it someone else *will*. No one else can tell our stories as we can; no one else should. If we want the truth, as we know it, remembered, we have to step forward and tell it. If we don't, we give up our chance to determine what our individual and collective experiences will mean for those who come after us.

When students begin to pay attention to the stories around them, and to write their own, they slowly begin to understand this responsibility and that through their writing they can influence what the future might look like. When we give them the opportunity to talk to others, to see what they've experienced, and to ask them what they think of the choices they made, we remind them that there is a world outside school that they are already a

part of, a world that desperately needs their active participation. Donald Graves has presented us with a challenge: "We need to consider seriously how writing can help develop the citizens of tomorrow." I think memoir is one possible way.

Advocating for attention to memoir doesn't mean we should try to convince students to ignore all the stories from popular culture. Even if it was a good idea, it would be a losing battle. Those other stories aren't going away, so what we need to do is give students tools to look at the narratives that surround them a little more critically. We need to give them alternatives too, additional stories to supplement the ones they already know. The stories that permeate our lives and culture all too often aren't the stories that will help our young people shape their own futures into the lives they want. Since story is such a powerful tool, using it more often in school, where powerful teaching tools are always needed, seems ideal. Unfortunately, as priorities in education shift, the trend seems to be to devote less time to stories: students hear them less, study them less, and work to create them less. This doesn't make stories less influential in our students' lives; it just means we as educators are less influential in helping students decide what stories are worth listening to. It's a lost opportunity. When we bring in the life stories of those around us, we expand students' ideas of what is possible. If we don't take the initiative to widen the chorus of voices our students hear beyond the media that constantly bombards them, we are selling our kids' dreams and their futures to the highest bidder.

As permeated as they are by pop culture stories, young people sense, even before they believe it, that these stories of our lives and the lives of the others we know is important subject matter that deserves serious attention. Figuring out how to handle these stories respectfully is a good reason, one they understand and often buy into, for learning to write well. Even initially the stories of our students' lives and the lives of those around them are interesting and relevant, but the more we work with them, the more relevant and interesting they become. Memoirist Vivian Gornick has observed, "Urgency seems to attach itself these days to the idea of a tale taken directly from life rather than one fashioned by the imagination." Memoir is exploding on bestseller lists, still, in more and more classrooms it is losing ground as testing takes over and any writing that doesn't explicitly connect to improving these test scores is pushed aside.

As writing teachers we need to resist continuing down that path. Our schools are not set up to build community, but that's a trend we owe it to our students to reverse. One of the vital first steps in making our classrooms safe and vibrant communities is working to honor where our students come from. Memoir writing is a natural way to do this. If students see themselves in the work we do in our classrooms, they are more likely to be involved. In her text *Reading, Writing, Rising Up*, Linda Christensen offers wonderful examples of how she arranges her classrooms so that students feel welcome to bring who they are to the work they do with her. She explains, "As a teacher I want to acknowledge the wisdom that resides in my students' homes. [...] I must find ways to honor the intelligence, common sense, and love that beats in the hearts of my students' families. In my classroom I want every student to feel pride in where they come from, in their heritage, and the people who clothe, shelter, and teach them." There is no better way to accomplish this task than by inviting students to write

“In telling our stories to each other, for each other, with each other, we make new stories that involve one another. It is partly by telling others where we've been, how we survived, what we've come to know is true, that we can begin to move forward together.”

about these people and the experiences they have with them. When I've seen my own writing instruction fail, it was often when the work we were doing, though it focused on necessary skills, resulted in lifeless products in which the students had no investment. When they aren't working on original work, too often students quickly become bored doing the writing and I am just as quickly bored reading it.

Memoir changes this. The genre can be used to improve all the writing skills students need and even to help students be successful on those very tests that are pushing it aside. Memoir done well is a demanding genre. Students must combine many of the fictional techniques they begin to learn early in their writing lives with some of the organizational and analytical skills they'll need to be successful in higher academic levels. As the work makes students stronger writers, it also accomplishes other important tasks, within our classrooms, our schools, and our wider communities. In telling our stories to each other, for each other, with each other, we make new stories that involve one another. It is partly by telling others where we've been, how we survived, what we fear, what we've come to know is true, that we can begin to move forward together and figure out where it is we want to go.

The desire to do the difficult work of developing the writing skills necessary to craft an initially random collection of experiences into a skillful memoir is already there for many students. People want to write about their lives, want to figure out what it all means. It is the reason older people have always written their life stories; they feel a need to make sense of their experiences, to see what they accomplished and preserve some piece of who they have been. Writing helps clarify this both for the writer and for those around him. This impulse to make meaning of your experience makes sense for someone looking back on their life after sixty years, but it also makes sense for someone looking back on their life after sixteen years. It even makes sense for a young child looking back over six years. Memoir's place in our society is changing to reflect this truth. Lucy Calkins's personal revelation seems to mirror this: "I used to think that we write memoir when our lives are done and we want to give that one last, loving look back," she writes, "but now I know that it is by looking back that we create our lives, ourselves." Memoir isn't just a tool for summarizing our lives, but also for directing them. It enables us to use the past to decide what we want our future to look like. Memoir helps us figure out how we came to be where we are, and it also helps us figure out how we came to be who we are.

St. Augustine, one of the first and most well-known autobiographical writers, described himself as "a man who writes as he progresses and who progresses as he writes." This is the kind of writer I'd like to be and I hope my students become as well — writers who, through their writing, not only try to make sense of their current life but also begin to envision all the possibilities of what could come next.

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The Church

I enter the church and the first thing I want to do is stand behind the pulpit. Then I realize that I'm in a Catholic church, but I don't think that God would mind my action. Then I see a man, quietly reading, and I realize I had better not follow my gut-calling. This is not my home. This is not my church. Even now, seven years after leaving church ministry, after very clearly and definitively deciding that I would not pursue seminary, that I would not become a minister, the pulpit still calls to me. The rebellious in me wonders what would happen if . . . but the respectful side of me says that not everything in life is about me; sometimes I must consider how what I do will impact another.

Candles are lit. The walls are ornate pictures. Stained glass windows, an altar, a pipe organ in the balcony, hard wooden pews that force you to sit up straight, hymnals in the pews — all things that are so familiar to me. Yet this is not my home. This is not my church. Still, I want to take the covering off the piano and play a little dirty. I want to light the candles on the altar, step back, and watch the flames dance.

Kathryn Reed

Informing Thought and Action

Donna L. Miller

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky says: "People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into life, one is safe to the end of one's days, and if one has one good memory left in one's heart, even that may be the means of saving us."

Although Dostoyevsky provides one reflection about memory, a multitude of others abound. A friend once suggested to me: "Memory is recollected moments in which someone has tasted a life, moments forceful enough, charged enough, to survive many other moments. Without such compelling moments, we are not ourselves, but rather a generic anyone."

I think memories are also like quilt squares; each is special with its own story to tell, and we patch them together one by one until one day we look back and discover they make a colorful blanket that cocoons us in comfort.

Regardless of one's personal definition, most of us would probably agree that memories

inform our thoughts and actions; they provide a cultural context in which we grow and respond to events.

Mem Fox's book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* further address the value of memories. In this poignant children's book, the 96-year-old Miss Nancy loses her memory, so the compassionate and curious young Wilfrid sets out to find it for her, asking various people, "What is a memory?"

From his interviews, Wilfrid collects this information: a memory is something warm, something from long ago, something that makes you cry, something that makes you laugh, and something as precious as gold.

I use this story as a prewriting prompt for a memory essay I invite from my juniors. Before I read the story to them, I ask them to define memory in their own words, to consider the purposes and values of memories. After hearing Fox's story, they respond to each of Wilfrid's prompts. I then encourage them to collect some quotes on memory. I share Dostoyevsky's and a few others: "Nothing is waste that makes a memory" (Ned Rorem) and "God gave us memories so that we might have roses in December" (James M. Barrie).

Next, I invite them to write voice poems. They have written these earlier in the year to learn the power of strong voice and vivid imagery and are familiar with their pattern and purpose. The process involves using an abstract noun, memory in this case, and assigning it a color, taste, smell, sound, feeling, and visual. This exercise is primarily an idea and image generating drill, a prompt for revision and an opportunity to infuse figurative language, strong verbs, and a rhythmic cadence. I often challenge students to eliminate ALL forms of the "to be" verb in creating their final drafts of these poems:

Memory is (a color).

It tastes like _____

smells like _____

sounds like _____

feels like _____, and

looks like _____.

An original draft might look like this:

Memories are blue-green.

They taste like stale, year-old Oreos at my grandma's house,
smell like chlorine at Medicine Hat Lodge,
sound like oldies blasting from the patio or basement: Beatles,
Monkees, Supremes,
feel like the harmlessly intense fights with my brother, and
look like bugs imprisoned in my bug cage.

From his list, the student wrote this poem:

Unforgotten Treasures by Colton Davies

Memories infest my nostrils with the chlorination of Medicine Hat Lodge,
causing nostalgic bliss with pictures of waterslides and a steamy sauna.

A stale, year-old Oreo manifests on my anxious tongue,
a memory from my grandma's cookie jar, not often replenished.

Punches, slaps, bites, and scratches embed my thoughts
from the never-ending rivalry with my older brother.

In my mind's eye, buoyant butterflies and buzzing bees and green
grasshoppers



Curiosity blooms in this writer's garden. Even after twenty-four years in the classroom, this "wondering" woman is always looking for a creative or colorful approach to elicit ideas from writers.

live in a plastic prison amid broken twigs, torn leaves,
and water droplets.
Living at my mercy, they beg for either freedom or death,
but not captivity.

Melodies of The Beatles, The Supremes, The Monkees, The Beach Boys,
and The Eagles breach the walls of my patio or of my dad's music room
and implant permanent memories of and passions for oldies hits.

Vectors in time, memories whisper from the past.
They conjure both joy and sorrow, but we cherish them nonetheless.

Another student performed the following pre-write, from which she
produced her poem:

Memories are golden.
They taste like gooey caramel cinnamon rolls,
smell like fresh coffee perking,
sound like Harry Carry's version
of the 7th inning stretch tune, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game,"
feel like satin sheets, and
look like a glittery wedding dress.

Memories **by Darcie Mohar**

Bringing me back to carefree years,
golden memories ease the anxiety of growing up.
They echo the original Harry Carry version of the 7th inning stretch tune,
"Take Me Out to the Ball Game,"
and remind I should never forget the past.
Like gooey caramel cinnamon rolls,
memories create a panacea for any difficult situation.
Treasured moments overpower the tragic times,
filling the hollow space left behind from heartache and despair,
and flow over my soul like scarlet satin sheets.
Fresh coffee perking in the kitchen wakes me up each morning
with an unmistakable scent that nothing else can claim,
similar to the memories triggered by only my specific encounters.
Recollections create my identity;
they form my life today and will forever guide me
by either my mistakes or my triumphs.
Under the dense layer of the past, my heart awaits the future.
My thoughts whirlwind
to the glittery, gleaming, glamorous wedding dress
that will someday survive as only a memory,
but for now can take a number as one of the distant twinkles in my eye.

All of these prewriting ideas usually work their way into students'
final drafts, whether in the introduction, body, or conclusion.

After all of their prewriting, I tell students: I want you to write an
essay in which you explore the meaning of memory. Consider organizing
your essay into three sections:

- 1) Introduction--What is your definition of memory?
- 2) Body--Select a memory, a defining moment in your life. Describe
this moment. Sometimes a number of small, simple moments are linked
by a common theme. Sometimes the events are bigger, but whatever
the drama inherent in the event, what distinguishes good memoirs is a
reflective angle, a lens of meaning that links the different stories or makes
even a single incident connect to the rest of the writer's life. Make that
connection.
- 3) Conclusion--What is the value of this, or of any memory?

This assignment produces
some of my students' best
work. Almost always,
these memoirs show up in their
portfolios as showcase pieces.
Not only are the essays imagery-
rich, they provide glimpses of
the student's identity; they are
discovery pieces, cherished for the
history they preserve, the moments
they capture for revisitation like a
photograph.

On one occasion when I wrote
with students, one memory I
recalled was sobbing through
Patricia Polacco's book *Pink and
Say*, a story I read to my juniors
during our study of the Civil War.
While I can name several reasons
to cry during that tale's telling, the
scene relating the violence against
Pinkus Aylee stands paramount:
"They smote him and dragged him
away from me. He looked back
at me and tried to say somethin'
more, but they crossed his back
with knotted hemp and pushed
him along. . . . It was told that he
was hanged within hours after
he was taken to Andersonville.
His body was thrown into a lime
pit" (Philomel Books, 1994). No
decent human being deserves such
indignity.

The memory produced the
following memoir. Although my
suffering cannot begin to compare
to Pink's, I learned about bias in
seventh grade, from Carol.

Sensitivity Training

She had hair the color of
birdseed—blonde and brown all
mixed together. It hung past
her shoulders, straight and
long, following the lines of her
lean body. And her eyes glowed
a glassy green like the marbles
no one wanted to trade away.
She was my nemesis in seventh
grade, my first experience with
public school.

Not in matters of beauty did I
measure this contest with Carol,
but with meanness. Carol
couldn't stand me, wouldn't
touch my papers handed
forward in history class, moved
her desk farthest from mine, as
if I were a germ.

I have never learned the
cause of this hatred. Was it my

family's poverty she thought she'd catch like chicken pox or my nun taught intelligence she envied?

I had had little previous experience with this level of alienation, although taunts were not new. After all, judgment and stereotyping often come from clothes, and mine were largely purchased at Bargain Basement, St. Francis Xavier's second-hand store. And the year my shoe size changed three times in fifth grade, my parents couldn't keep up with the cost, since they had seven others to feed and clothe besides me. So, they bought what was cheaply available in my size; bowling shoes, nurse's shoes, and tire-tread leather shoes fashioned in Mexico for their durability sat heavily with shame upon my feet.

I believed my family couldn't afford any of my material desires, so there was no practical purpose in indulging in any fantasy of designer labels. Mostly, my clothes hung mismatched on my skinny frame that never did sprout breasts until I was 29, pregnant, and nursing. But after that beautiful bonding experience of motherhood, the extra weight of a B cup shrunk away to less mammary tissue than I had previously possessed.

In high school locker room comparisons, I never measured up to those developing the allure that turned a boy's head, even though I did my bust enhancing exercises diligently, chanting in prayerful earnest: "We must, we must, we must increase our bust; the bigger the better, the tighter the sweater, the boys depend on us." My father once gave me a reply to the early taunt: "Carpenter's daughter, flat as a board." Yet with all my waiting, the carpenter never did build on the addition.

Every day I was under Carol's eyes, the subject of her sneer. My cat-eye glasses didn't flatter my face, my haircut looked obviously unprofessional, more like the goats had grazed there rather than Dad had wielded the scissors as best he could, given that he wasn't a barber and only succeeded with the boys' haircuts because he could use the electric clippers for a buzz cut. I felt shame, but my self-esteem did not diminish, since my stronger feeling was frustration. Since I had no control over these "faults," I could do little to "make right" what Carol saw as wrong.

From Carol, I learned first hand the feelings produced by hate and intolerance. This experience with unsettling alienation groomed me into a sensitive person, an advocate for those often victimized. Consequently, one of my basic life philosophies includes this truth: Although we may have a right to our opinions, we also have an obligation to decency. Carol didn't seem to know that basic truth, but without her, perhaps I would not know it either.

MWP's 3rd Annual

Rural Conference on Writing Education

"Responding to the Challenges of Access, Relevance and Diversity:
Teaching Writing in Montana."

April 21, 2007

MSU College of Technology in Great Falls

Conference highlights:

- ◇ Debra Magpie Earling, author of *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewa*
- ◇ Workshop Strand on implementing Indian Education for All

The conference is open to all. If you are unfamiliar with Writing Project, come see what we are about. If you are a teacher consultant who hasn't been to an event lately come renew contacts with old MWP friends and bring new friends along.

Registration will begin in late January.

Contact Caroline Simms, Project Coordinator, for more details: caroline.simms@umontana.edu

From Music to Memoir

Musical Writing Prompts from Jake Hansen

Music is a vital and ubiquitous text for many of our students. iPods and the like have made it ever more convenient for students to live with a constant soundtrack. They listen to music in ways that we wish they would read: they talk about what they're listening to, they make choices about what music matters to them, they connect their music to their lives, and they listen to the same songs (texts) again and again until they know them by heart. With a little encouragement, they'll even analyze their music and lyrics in ways that we want them to analyze other types of texts.

While we certainly can't drop everything for music appreciation, we can bring music-as-text into our classroom in a variety of ways. Music can work as a writing prompt or as a model text to illustrate a literary device, a discussion strategy, or a form of literary response.

Some of the best music for this work will come from your students. Become conversant in what and who they're listening to, or ask them for recommendations that they think would be appropriate for the types of activities you want them to try.

Somany songs deal with memoir that it would be impossible to list even a sampling here. Luckily, our students are already experts in this field. Encourage them to recommend tracks that deal with memoir for your consideration. Here's an annotated list of a few of my favorites, along with a sample writing prompt for each. I'm not making any promises about how these will go over, but it's a start. Consider looking up the lyrics online to see if one of these songs might work for your class. Better yet, figure out a way to give one of these songs a listen!

"Love of My Life" by Erykah Badu

Badu personifies hip-hop, recalling how she fell in love with the music and all that it's done for her. She plays with the language of the music, referring to when the "tables turned" and how she "sampled true love."

Personify a major influence in your life (something that isn't a person). You might compare your relationship to this influence to the type of relationship you could have with a person, i.e. "My cunning nemesis procrastination" or "My role-model the hamburger."

"Angry Any More" by Ani DiFranco

DiFranco traces her childhood frustration with how her parents dealt with each other and her evolution from anger towards them towards a place of more understanding.

Trace your change of heart about a situation in your life. Consider following DiFranco's pattern of narration addressed to a general audience followed by thoughts directed towards a figure in that narration.

"Pamela Brown" by Leo Kotke

Kotke remembers a girlfriend from his younger days, praising her beauty and thanking her for breaking up with him. In the time since she left him, he's become a famous musician who's traveled all over, while she's married to a local loser. This is a funny twist on the cliché theme of remembering lost love fondly.

Predict your eventual success over someone who's conflicted with you recently. For instance, you might write a letter the English teacher who gave you a C- on the occasion of your first Pulitzer.

"If I Had Known" by Greg Brown

Brown remembers a couple of scenarios that involve great happiness, ending each with the statement that "It's just as well we don't know when things will never be that good again."

Collect a few perfect moments from your life so far, and try to capture them in as vivid detail as possible. Focus not only on what happened, but why those happenings couldn't have been made any better given your experience at the time.

"Lakes of Pontchatrain" by The Be Good Tanyas

Recounting a memory of life on the road, the narrator sings of his experience in a visited town. Both the characters and the place are painted vividly.

Use rhyming couplets to tell a story without writing something that sounds like a nursery rhyme.



Jake Hansen is trying to decide if he deserved an iPod for Christmas.



Claudia Crase grew up outside of Chicago and spent summers on her grandparents' farm in the Missouri Ozarks. She teaches English to 7th graders in Helena, Montana, where the topography is much more interesting, and allows for hiking, backpacking and real skiing. Her professional passions include media literacy, writing, issues of social justice, and the effects of poverty on learning. Above is a photo of the author today. Below is one from a few years back.



Excerpts from *Mapping the Ozarks: A Farm Memoir* Claudia Crase

A human community, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place.

Wendell Berry, The Work of Local Culture

When I wasn't mad at him, my brother was my pal. We traipsed around the "hollers of the lower forty," characters in our own Ozarkian tale. After tuning out the adults' warnings about ticks, we'd grab our BB gun and head out through the gate of the yard. We'd honed our aim on plenty of tin cans and were ready to take grandma up on her offer to fry up the legs of any bullfrogs that we could bring back.

"Do you think she'll really cook them?" I looked over at my gun-toting brother.

"She said she would."

"We'll find some big ones," I assured us.

The pond was a "fair piece" from the house. Give up any notions you might have of fresh water, pour a liberal dose of half and half into a cup of coffee, and you can picture that pond. This was not bullfrog hunting; this was bullfrog hide and seek. We could hear their croaky calls, but we couldn't see a one of them. Now I had no trouble swerving from bullfrog hunting to some other adventure, but try convincing the one with the gun that the mission was over before it had gotten started. My brother crouched down on one knee, Daniel Boone-like, and studied the surface of the water. He clenched that gun and watched for bubbles on the surface at the pond's edge. Our suburban know-how did not extend to ponds nor their inhabitants. We barely knew about guns. Our legs burned and our eyes ached as we tried to make up the shapes of bullfrogs in the water. Mike shot at nothing a couple of times. We were too impatient to wait for the imagined bullfrogs to become real enough to bag.

I don't remember taking any frogs back to the house that day. I do remember my brother taking aim at and striking dead a crow that had been cawing from a cottonwood branch over our heads. While he did a victory dance under the tree, I watched, horrified, as it fell. It seemed worse to shoot something out of the sky. I peered at that bird, and in that moment, a pest turned beautiful in death. I never picked up another gun. My dad went out later and returned with a bulging burlap sack. I didn't want the story of their deaths; I turned away at the opening of the rough-hewn bag. My grandmother cut those bullfrogs up and cleaned them. From the other room, I heard tiny BBs clank into the aluminum pan.

Goin' to Town

The thought of going to town after some weeks on the farm could ignite an antsy fire under my brother and me that made us squabble and bicker. Kids and grown ups go to town for different reasons: the grown ups for work, the kids for fun. Mike and I would talk on and on about what we'd get when we were there. Mostly, our store trips would amount to lots of looking, and very little buying. We each had brought money from home just for these days in town, but found that getting our eyes full of the variety of sights in town was even better than buying.

To go to town, my grandmother would cover her hair with a plastic rain hat to keep off the dust. My grandfather oiled his thinning crown and donned his old-man's hat. Because we couldn't all fit in one car, we took two. I always wanted to ride with my grandparents; I'd have to relearn each year that they weren't that much fun on the way. They sat stiffly, strangers to this fancy going-to-town car. They were like plastic forks set out on a fine damask tablecloth in an elegant restaurant. There was little



Claudia during her years in the Osarks

talk, even after a whole year had passed since last we had visited. It was as if you had a limited number of words in a lifetime and you didn't want to waste them on idle chatter. What if you ran out of words and you needed some to say something important like, "Where's the bathroom?" I rode along with them in silence, my legs sticking to the plastic covers of the backseat.

Occasionally, I'd overhear mumbled words between them. My grandfather would mention to grandma that he had "seen Clay over to the feed store." I knew it was supposed to be at the store, but knew it would be rude to correct him. "Whyyyyy. I reckon we'll be there shortly," was his drawn out reply to my query concerning our arrival time. Queasy tummy. My tendency toward carsickness was born and raised on the winding roads of southern Missouri.

My mother had been afraid when we were young kids that my dad would pass along his "bad country grammar." He might have been naturally quiet, but her fears that his country ways would rub off on us rendered him mute in our presence. I loved when my dad would "get down to the country." His speech patterns would slow; a molasses river would seep into his vowels. He'd become almost friendly.

As we'd draw near the town of Thayer, Missouri, my anticipation of the hustle and bustle would screech to a halt, giving way to the

idle lope of rural reality. Time turtles along in town just like it does on the farm. I'd have to cool my jets.

Thayer tried hardest of any of the towns in the Central Plateau to be a town. There was a Piggly-Wiggly, a five-and-dime, a feed store, a diner or two, the stock yards, a couple of machine shops and a western wear shop where we bought board-stiff, button-fly Levis once a year.

There'd always be a few guys in ag caps dawdling out in front of the machine shop garage. This scene, and each person's position in it, was as predictable as a postcard. Sitting was a pastime in this neck of the woods. It never seemed like any work needed to be done. The scuff of a boot would stir the dust. Dogs lay in whatever shade they could find, often beneath a beat up pick up truck. Conversations were full of more pause than sound. Talking took work. Most folks would preface any sentence with that long, drawn out "Whyyyyy," like my granddad did. It was as if the sentence needed to be roused from a deep sleep before it would be spoken.

This was the McFann Brothers' shop. I was always so surprised when my dad, who wore a suit and tie to work every day when we were at home, knew these folks by name. I wanted to see him as odd for this, but his personal connection to the McFann brothers would earn us the right to walk through their auto garage to retrieve ice-cold Coke bottles from their upright old-fashioned vending machine. We'd pull at the stainless steel door handle, grasp a bottle by its cap, and slide it out from its row to the extraction slot. After wresting the bottle free—glass grinding past the metal workings—we'd wrench their tops off with the built in bottle opener on the door. The black liquid fizzed and scalded the backs of our throats, causing tears to leap to our eyes. We never let on.

One of the last stops in town was the five-and-dime: the emporium of boredom abatement. A dollar fifty could buy plenty of fun, but you didn't want to waste it on something that didn't have the potential to fill endless idle hours at the farmhouse. After poring over and fingering many options—root beer barrel-shaped candy, boxed picture puzzles, balsa wood gliders, coloring books, jump ropes, sets of balls and jacks—Mike and I would usually part with our money for the same two toys each summer: a pea shooter for him and paper dolls for me. Purchases in hand, back we'd wind, over the roads to the farm, sipping cool Coke from condensation-clad bottles, thinking that this trip to town had been mighty fine.



Claudia's grandfather with their shetland pony

Reading/Writing/Teaching Memoir: Methods for Building Community with Literature Study in Three Parts

Heather Bruce

For the undergraduate course, "Teaching Reading and Literature," which I teach at the University of Montana, I have developed a three-part memoir unit to help pre-service teachers think through ways to incorporate the teaching of memoir in their middle and high school classes. I share the assignment with MWP newsletter readers to provide a resource for a self-study guide in designing memoir materials for use in your own classrooms. The guide encourages teachers to incorporate effective reading strategies with promising strategies for teaching literature, specifically memoir. The students working with this guide as an assignment have found their greatest challenge is settling on a definition of memoir. Be prepared to offer a working definition for your students; if your experience is anything like mine, it will be the first question they ask. Following self-study development, try out the unit with your students. Consider publishing your work in NCTE's journal *Notes Plus* or on READ/WRITE/THINK, both excellent resources for teaching ideas.



Heather E. Bruce directs the Montana Writing Project. In her spare time, she teaches classes in English Education at the University of Montana. Between 3 and 5 a.m., she thinks of herself as a closet poet. When more awake, she knits, enjoys red wine, hikes the hills north of Miller Creek Canyon in Missoula, skate skis, swims, and pursues peace pedagogy through feminist rhetorical analysis.

Part One: Reading About and Writing Memoir

Background

In his wonderful book *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle and High School*, Randy Bomer discusses the value of teaching memoir in the English language arts classroom. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* by Azar Nafisi also serves as a wonderful model for the craft of literacy memoir we will be writing in this unit. Here are some of the major points Bomer makes about the value of memoir:

- Memoir is literary nonfiction. Memoir is not autobiography, not a diary or chronicle of one's days; it is an art. Like fiction, it's fashioned deliberately.
- Memoir calls for strong language; for metaphors and similes; for characters in action and a good story; for problems and themes; for humor and voice; for rich specifics; for rhythm and repetition; for the telling detail.
- Memoir is how writers look for the past and make sense of it. We figure out who we are, who we have become, and what it means to us and to the lives of others: a memoir puts the events of a life in perspective for the writer and for those who read it. It is a way to validate to others the events of our lives—our choices, perspectives, decisions, responses.
- Memoir helps us put into our students' hands keys with which they can begin unlocking their own life histories. We can help our students learn to pay attention to their lives in this way, crafting themselves into certain kinds of persons by choosing what has been important to them, by deciding what matters.
- Often the best memoirs explore a number of small, simple moments, linked by a common theme and a reflective angle or a lens of meaning that links the different stories. Admirable memoirs seem to be saying, Here's something important about me, and probably about other people, and here's how it came to be or worked out in my life.
- Crafting meaning in memoir is the act of turning our lives into projects' and thinking of our lives as projects is what makes our tenure on the planet purposeful—and thus keeps us alive. And so, gazing full face at the question "So What?" after a moment's faltering and a longer moment's reflection, we get busy, inventing the truth for all we're worth. Right now. We have to make something of our lives.

Purpose or Rationale for the Assignment

It is essential for teachers to build community with the students in their classroom if they are going to accomplish the objectives of:

- Helping students trust and extend their own responses to literature
- Working collaboratively
- Nurturing student-to-student responses to literature

One good way to begin the task of building community is to help students feel valued and safe in the environment of your classroom. A strategy for accomplishing this goal is to demonstrate to students the ways in which you value their stories. This assignment will also help you to identify your relationship with literature reading and the effects it may have on your teaching subjectivity.

Assignment

This assignment has three parts. The first part requires you to write a brief (3-5 pages) memoir that illustrates your relationship with reading literature. The second part requires you to develop a 1-2 day elaborated response-to-poetry lesson. The third part requires you to design a 3-4 week unit plan using the constructed genre of memoir, which you could use with a middle school OR a high school class during the first weeks of school. Your unit should include suggestions for further reading and writing activities.

Literature Memoir

Think how you might tell an illustrative story that would describe your relationship with reading literature. You might tell an illustrative story that would describe your relationship with reading literature. You might choose to describe your first positive or negative encounter with literature; you might choose to describe your favorite place to read. These are suggestions only. You will want to use the story to illustrate your answer to the "So What?" question of why should we read literature. Showing details will carry the message more than telling explanations. This is an opportunity for you to practice writing in a genre you might choose to teach students. Try to have more fun than panic with this assignment.

Prewriting Activities:

You may wish to begin by listing your thoughts as they come, letting the memories come as they will. If you can't remember at first, don't worry. Your "unconscious" mind will go to work on the task. Jot down these fragments, situations, scenes, characters, images. In other words, simply begin to collect "stuff about reading literature" from your memory. Here are some questions to prompt your planning or pre-writing note taking.

- Who or what was the earliest influence, either positive or negative, on you as a reader of literature? How did those influences affect your attitudes toward reading literature? Toward your reading habits?
- How have you felt over the years about the tasks of reading literature that have been required of you? How do you feel now? Where do you see yourself as a reader of literature right now? What do you think you need to work on at this stage of development?
- What have been your behaviors as a reader of literature? Where did you learn them? That is, how do you get the job done"? When and where did you (and do you) seem to read best? How much could you (and can you) read at one sitting? Do you need to pace, eat, read aloud, talk aloud, or reread as you go?
- To what extent do you read just for yourself? For other people? Does having an audience for your reading responses help or hinder you? What about reading for a "teacher audience"? What kinds of literature have you enjoyed reading most/least?
- In what ways have your reading interests and strategies developed and changed over the years?

The point about note taking is NOT to answer EVERY question but to gather a rich data base of impressionistic material to write from. Let your mind take you from early memories to more recent ones. Think about the literature reading you do just for yourself. Think about the teachers from your past, the literature assignments and the grades or other feedback you received.

Writing:

Use your notes as an organizational aid to write literature reading memoir in which you describe an experience that has had significant influence on you as a reader of literature. Analyze the experience to illustrate the influence it has had on your perceptions about yourself as a reader of literature. In the conclusion of the paper, draw some generalizations about what these experiences tell about what you believe may be the best way to use literature as a tool for learning in your classroom. The paper should be no more than 5 pages in length.

Audience/Post-writing:

We will share our literature memoirs in small groups in class. Please bring (2) copies, one to read aloud in small group and one to hand into me. After small group sharing, we will discuss any patterns or trends that emerge and the ways in which your experiences may help to encourage or hinder your experiences with reading literature.

Part Two: Designing and Teaching a Responding-to-Poetry Lesson Plan:

Select one poem thematically based in memoir (speaker is "I") that you might wish to teach students at the middle school (grades 6-8) and one poem at the high school (grades 9-12). The poems should be of appropriate interest and complexity to teach for one to two days at the specified grade level. Resources for this assignment include Beers, Blau, Rosenblatt and Somers (particularly information about responding to reading and to poetry); Carey-Webb is also helpful.

Possible examples (others are certainly appropriate):

"Fourteen" by Lucille Clifton

"Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde

"Fifteen" by William Stafford

"Seventeen" by Gary Soto

"Queens, 1963" by Julia Alvarez

"I, Too" and "Negro" by Langston Hughes

"At Navajo Monument Tribal Valley School" by Sherman Alexie

"13/16" by Sherman Alexie

"My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke

Guidelines:

Create a lesson appropriate to the grade level and the poem. Explain why you think the poem is appropriate for the age group you identify. Be sure to include (i.e., reference) at least one idea from the course texts on teaching literature to justify your methods and questioning techniques. Identify the school(s) of literary criticism you will be drawing upon to develop questions to engage students in discussion of the poem (refer to Rosenblatt, Blau, or Carey-Webb).

The lesson should follow the generally accepted format of:

- Background and Overview/Goal
- Rationale—why you are teaching this; how it accomplishes your larger goals for teaching
- Standards addressed—NCTE, list and explain how
- Content to Be Taught—concepts, texts, reading and literary skills overviewed
- Behavioral Objectives (Through this poetry lesson, the learner will...)
- Materials Needed—list of items both teacher and students require for the lesson to succeed
- Instructional Activities—scripted instructional prompts labeled Pre-reading (an opening activity that captures students' interest and focuses their prior knowledge and identifies the purpose for reading), During-reading activity (activity to support for comprehension), Post-reading strategies (discussion, writing, &tc.). Indicate the time planned for each step (in five minute increments) as well as the classroom management strategies you will use (individual, small group, whole class).
 - ◇As you design your lesson plan, consider all the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, visually representing) and the different learning styles/multiple intelligences.
 - ◇ Consider possibilities for technology integration
 - ◇ Include at least 10 specific response-to-literature questions to ask students.
 - ◇ Include potential writing prompts to use with the lesson.
 - ◇ Be sure to end the lesson in such a way that students are encouraged to summarize, synthesize, and reflect on learning objectives.
 - ◇Be sure to include at least 4 references to course texts read so far.
- Methods for Assessment and Evaluation that include a description of how you will recognize student learning when you see it.

Part Three: Designing and Teaching a Genre-based Unit: Memoir

Valuable resources for this assignment include Beers, Blau, Michaels, Rosenblatt and Somers (particularly information about responding to reading and to poetry); Blau, (particularly information about responding to reading literature); Carey-Webb (particularly for theoretical identification).

The Assignment:

For this assignment, you will develop a reading/writing workshop in which you explore the genre of memoir with your students. You should first identify several memoirs (or excerpts of memoirs) you might choose to read with students in addition to the poems you have already selected and microtaught. The texts the students read will provide models of memoir for what they will write. Decide on a grade level to which you plan to teach these selections. Determine the order in which you plan to teach these selections and identify the writing prompts and activities you will use to explore memoir with your students.

▪ *Background and Overview of theme:*

Identify and explain why the theme is relevant to students of the intended grade level. References to class texts and to NCTE/IRA and MT standards are expected.

▪ *Content to Be Taught:*

List the literature selections (memoir, title, and author) in the order to be taught. Also identify the

organizational framework(s) you intend to use to teach the literature selections (whole class, literature circle groups, individual choice texts or a combination of these strategies). Briefly (1-2 sentences) explain why you will use the particular strategies for organizing reading. Identify the accompanying writing prompts and activities you will use.

▪ *Annotated Bibliography:*

For each reading selection, include title, author, original publication date. Annotate the memoir selections by giving a full summary of the selection and its relationship to building community with the students. (Recommended length for annotations is ½ to ¾ page per memoir). Poems and song lyrics (with author and publication date) should be copied and their relevance to building community explained. Consider that your audience may include teachers who have not read these selections or who have read the texts with different theme emphases.

▪ *Rationale:*

Identify and explain how the literature you select and the writing you ask your students to do will accomplish your teaching goals/philosophy. Explain the “So what?” or significance of the course of study. Discuss why the selections are presented in a certain order or configuration.

▪ *Instructional Plan:*

Write the lessons to teach the selections and the accompanying writing activities. For all minilessons, include the following:

◊ Behavioral Objectives: (Through this such-and-such lesson, the learner will...) Identify both literary and writing objectives for your students

◊ Materials Needed: List items required to complete the instructional activities

◊ Instructional Activities: Indicate the time planned for each step (in five minute increments) as well as the classroom management strategies you will use (individual, small group, whole class). Include appropriate handouts, boardwork, discussion questions, &c. If you use or adapt ideas from another person or text, cite the source in the lesson. Categorize the type of instruction: teacher presentation, whole class discussion, collaborative group work, individual work, &c. Activities/strategies for this thematic unit might integrate film, media, the aesthetic arts, other subject areas, multiple intelligences, collaborative learning, creative drama, and multicultural perspectives. You might also use nonfiction and other print resources.

The instructional plan should contain the following:

1. Opening/pre-reading and pre-writing activities for the unit: Design one activity that activates students' prior knowledge, sets a purpose for reading, introduces students to the theme, and prepares them to read the first selection(s). The first selection may be a poem, essay, short story, video clip, song, novel or play.

2. During reading strategies/activities: Design activities based on a critical theoretical framework that will engage students during the reading of the memoir and support comprehension. Label each activity according to the type of response expected (e.g. reader-response, feminist, deconstruction, cultural studies, &c.).

3. Writing strategies/activities: Design one activity that will engage students in writing memoir based on Bomer's guidelines above that involves students in pre-writing and drafting (summarize possibilities for sharing, revising, responding, editing, publishing). Remember one of the goals is building community.

4. Post-reading and post-writing activities for the unit: Design one activity that encourages students to synthesize, evaluate, and reflect upon their understandings and insights into memoir.

5. Authentic vocabulary lesson: Develop an authentic vocabulary lesson to integrate at an appropriate place of your choosing in this unit based on ideas gained from studying Michaels *Dancing with Words*.

6. Methods for Assessment and Evaluation: The closing activity may serve as unit evaluation. Please include a description of how you will recognize student learning when you see it.

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Ford: 1914-2005

Jenni Frizzell

At seventeen, he fell in love with his Spanish teacher, took her out, learned about infinitives; she was older, but not by much. At eighteen, he paid five cents an acre for a spread of prairie bordering the Musselshell River that extends for miles in each direction. He wanted to be able ride all afternoon without hitting barbed wire, to drive cattle from one pasture to the next without seeing another human being.

At nineteen he married the daughter of a neighboring ranch owner, never really loved her. She would threaten him with her own suicide after the second child was born. Said if he went to work that day—or any day—she would be dead when he got home. After three years of this, he laid a knife and a gun on the dining room table and went to work the hayfields. She never said a word after that. Then one day, she was gone, moved to town, with the kids.

At thirty-five he fell for the judge's wife and the town had a hay-day when she married so soon after her divorce. They had a fit when a baby came six months later. He breathed her like she was his air. He found a type of well-oiled machine in their love. At forty-three he went to her funeral, cursing the ground and God and cancer.

At fifty-five, he married a tiny, mean woman nicknamed Spike in Vegas. She moved him to town, away from his land, his alfalfa, and his horses. He would sit by the window and smoke and drink glasses of whiskey, his hands getting softer.

At eighty he married the nurse that had been hired to ensure he could live at the ranch and without falling, without starving. His smile came back and his eyesight faded. She took care of him and let his bank account take care of her. She set out his clothes and sent Christmas cards to his family.

At ninety-two he married his first love—his pastures, the river, the livestock—and laid down in a bed beneath a grove of aspens, overlooking a muddy river and grazing black cows. She is the one love that will outlive him, and he'll be damned if he'll leave her.

This year Caroline Simms (at right) is teaching two writing classes at U of M and working with Montana Writing Project as the Project Coordinator. Jenni Frizzell (at left) teaches high school English at Hellgate High School in Missoula. They wrote these pieces about their respective grandfathers during the 2006 Summer Institute. Both writings are examples of one of the important features of writing memoir, being able to effectively recreate the “characters” in our lives. This pair of pieces could be useful examples for working on this aspect of memoir writing with students.

Publication Opportunity for Student Writing

Signatures from the Big Sky

Encourage your students to publish their writing. The 17th edition of Signatures from Big Sky, Montana Student/Literary Magazine, will be published in May 2007. Writing students K-12 are encouraged to participate. The publishing project offers an opportunity for teachers to work closely with their students on editing, re-constructing or discussing their work to ready it for publication. The primary considerations in selecting art and writing to be published are: originality, creativity and excellence for the grade level. “Original” means that no copies of other artworks, photos or literature will be accepted. Students who are published and their teachers will receive complimentary copies of Signatures when it comes out in May. All Montana public school libraries and some private schools also receive copies.

Guidelines: Art submissions should be 8-1/2”x11” artwork or photos for reproduction in black and white. Copies rather than originals are acceptable. Writing submissions may be short stories up to three typed pages, poems or essays, which are revised, edited and typed. All submissions require a declaration of originality signed by the student. (Example: I declare that the work I have produced was not copied from any other source but is my own original concept.) Print (on back of art, top of each page of writing) the student's name, school, complete school address with zip code, teacher's full name and student's grade level. **Please send submissions to the chairperson nearest your school by Feb. 1, 2007:**

Billings: Lue Ponich, 1145 N 32nd St., Billings, MT 59101
Glasgow: Linda Allie, 511 2nd Ave. N., Glasgow, MT 59230
Great Falls: Scott Clapp, CMR High School, 228 17Ave. W., Great Falls, MT 59404
Helena: Debbie Dorrance, 150 Horse Shoe Bend Rd., Helena, MT 59602
Bozeman: Heather Fisher, Chief Joseph Middle School, 309 N. 11 Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
Missoula: Lorilee Evans, Big Sky High School, 3100 South Ave. W., Missoula, MT 59804
Whitefish: Nicole Reed, 520 Somers Ave., Whitefish, MT 59937

Questions? Call or e-mail Jan Clinard at the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, 406-444-0652 or jclinard@oche.montana.edu; or Shirley Olson in Laurel, 406-628-7063 or soho@imt.net

Clyde Walter Teel

Caroline Simms

In old age he shuffled in slippers and sweatpants. Before, he'd never left the house in anything less than pressed pants and a buttoned shirt. More often than not he wore suits, which had to be custom tailored for my grandfather's unique physique. He wore his weight in front, a perfectly round mass that sat centered on his torso. He had grown up in poverty, the son of a vegetable farmer, had fought for his education and entrance into middle class and won.

In his adult life he respected and sought out good food, and this emerged on his front like a badge of honor. The question, then: belt above or below the belly? He chose the middle, his belt accenting a prosperous part of the man. As he aged, though, the belt line drifted north, shrinking the length of his chest to just inches, as year after year he sank lower in his chair. In his prime, he had been deliberate, calculatedly generous, and somber. As a child I would stare up at him, the yards of fabric of his suits adding to the imposing power of his six feet and then some inches. The expanse of cloth was topped by a creased, heavy face, and his stern lingering gaze.

I have wondered if the tailor ever made other suits like Clyde's. His pants had to be large of waist to accommodate the perfect sphere of stomach mass, but gently tapered so as not to swing too loosely around his thin legs. They were shaped like a great funnel; something I noticed when I would hold them up in the air to shake out their folds before helping him put them on. By the age of 95 he had lost the ability to balance on his own.

The suit coats were carefully constructed as well. They needed to be wide enough to button but not pull over his belly, yet not look like wings flapping when he wore them loose and unbuttoned. A masterful tailor could accomplish this, and he found one whose shop was not an unreasonable drive from his small Pennsylvania town. This craftsman made him dozens of suits over the years, all with my grandfather's initials monogrammed into the faux-silk linings. He never bought a suit that he didn't need, and he wore them all, with serious concern for what was appropriate for each occasion. Those he wore to his law office were not the same as those for formal dinners or weddings, his church suits were kept clean and sacredly separate, and finally, as all his friends dropped away before him, he wore his black funeral suit more frequently.

When he died at 98 years old, my brother and I were responsible for his closet full of suits. We stared at the rows of lonely cloth, touching them and wondering. There were pinstripes and solids, wools for summer and winter, only one or two khakis for hot weather. Two were lightweight and meant for travel; for the days when it was necessary to dress with respect for the privilege of flying. They all fit no one but Clyde. We were at a loss as to what to do with them. There was no point to keeping them for family as neither my father nor my brother had that stomach or could fill their girth. There was something sacrilegious about selling them, so we gave them away to the Goodwill in his town. There they will sit, until someone notices the fine fabrics, the workmanship and the mostly timeless style of those suits. Then, perhaps someone else who is fighting for their success as he did will buy a couple for a few dollars and feel strength in the authority they lend. They will notice the C.W.T. stitched above the inside pockets, and wonder about the man who was both round and wise enough to fill such fine suits.

Emerging Brilliance

I am like the dandelion
never quite sure
of my place
in the world

Caught
between
emerging brilliance
And quiet silence

Trying to move
toward
the warmth.

Always a struggle,
but stronger for it...

~ Judy Altenbrun

Writing Project Resources on the Web

Have you visited the National Writing Project's website recently?
For pedagogical articles, book suggestions, funding possibilities,
information on professional development and more check out the site:

www.writingproject.org

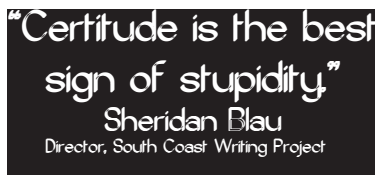
Montana Writing Project Joins MEA/MFT as New Curriculum Group

Heather E. Bruce, Director
Donna L. Miller, Co-Director

The 2006 MEA/MFT Annual Educator's Conference in Billings marked Montana Writing Project's (MWP) debut as an MEA/MFT Curriculum Group. MWP's new status as a curriculum group helps fulfill the MWP mission to provide high quality professional development in writing education to teachers in grades pre-20 across the curriculum. Like others in the more than 200-site network of the National Writing Project, MWP offers professional development programs in writing education, which are based on three basic principles:

- Teachers of writing themselves should write
- Teachers are the best teachers of other teachers
- Teachers benefit from studying writing research and scholarship together

As a result of MWP's new MEA/MFT status, an inaugural strand of writing workshops by MWP teacher-consultants appeared on the conference program, thanks to the diligence of Conference Co-Chairs, Donna L. Miller of Chinook High School and Rina Moog of Billings Senior High School. MWP highlights at the conference included Nancy Linnell of Potomac School's standing-room-only "Journal Writing in the Primary Grades" and Rina Moog's captivating children's literature and writing workshop, "Jumping In: Workshops in the English Classroom." The MWP strand also included "Montana Writing Project, Live!"—a whirlwind tour of the writing project experience expertly hosted by Jake Hansen, UM-Missoula; Caroline Simms, MWP Program Coordinator; Mandy Knight, Ft. Benton High School; and Jenni Frizzell, Hellgate High School, Missoula.



MEA/MFT curriculum status provides MWP matching funds to host well-known writing experts as guest speakers and workshop presenters. This year MWP sponsored Sheridan Blau, former NCTE President and veteran Director of the South Coast Writing Project at UC-Santa Barbara, as keynote speaker and workshop presenter. Professor Blau is the author of *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers* (Heinemann, 2003); his MEA/MFT workshop "Beyond Response in the Study of Literature" paced participants through a literature workshop that puts readers in the meaning-making seat.

In his keynote speech, "Consequential Literacy," Blau discussed the importance of letting readers struggle to make their own meaning. He challenged teachers to help students tussle with difficulty because "when we are learning, we are continually open to other possibilities." "Certitude," Blau said, "is the best sign of stupidity." Blau urged teachers to question the bureaucratic drive for certain, rapid-fire insistence on right answers, as such close down myriad possibilities for learning.

- Textual literacy is procedural knowledge—knowing how to find meaning;
- Intertextual literacy is informational knowledge—knowing about and making connections among "texts";
- Personal or performative literacy is enabling knowledge—knowing oneself in ways that create other possibilities.

Blau identified dimensions of personal or performative literacy, to which teachers should help students ascribe:

1. Capacity for sustained focused attention;
2. Willingness to suspend closure: to entertain problems rather than avoid them;
3. Willingness to take risks: to predict and be wrong, to respond honestly, to offer variant readings, to challenge and talk back to texts, to acknowledge gaps and contradictions;
4. Tolerance for failure: willingness to re-read and re-read again;
5. Tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty;
6. Intellectual generosity and fallibilism: willingness to suspend disbelief, to appreciate alternative perspectives, to learn from texts and from other readers, and to engage in methodological believing as well as doubting;

7. Metacognitive awareness; the habit of monitoring one's own understanding.

Readers of Sheridan Blau's *The Literature Workshop* know that his book offers ample theoretical grounding and practical applications for conducting literature and writing workshops with students that promote textual, intertextual and personal/performative literacy. Those who are unfamiliar with his book will find a wealth of good ideas therein.

Another benefit of MEA/MFT status is hosting both a MWP hospitality room and information table at the Annual Educator's Conference. The highlights in Billings came with a surprise visit from Montana's First Lady, Nancy Schweitzer, and the Governor's Policy Advisor on Education, Jan Lombardi. MWP table volunteers had an interesting conversation about writing to learn math and science, one of the Governor and First Lady's premier educational initiatives, as well as a fascinating exchange about Montana Writing Project's thoughts about the Montana University System Writing Assessment. From the table, MWP also launched its first statewide publication with curricular ideas and other useful information for teachers of writing edited by Christa Umphrey, MWP technology liaison, and had numerous interesting interactions with Montana educators (The most notable with a male teacher who insisted that writing was "woman's work." Hmmmnn...)

We look forward to increased participation at the 2007 Educator's Conference next October in Belgrade. MWP teacher-consultant Eileen Zombro of Sacajewa Middle School in Bozeman is Conference Chair. Eileen will enlist the help of fellow Teacher-Consultants at Sacajewa, Debra Waite and Sue Stolp.

MWP Director Honored

At the MEA/MFT Educator's Convention last October, MATELA presented two Distinguished Educator Awards, one to Montana Writing Project Director, Heather E. Bruce.

During her 31 years of service as a professional, Bruce has taught in the K-16 environment and currently holds a position as Associate Professor at the University of Montana. Her colleagues consider her "inspirational," "dedicated," and "committed [to keeping] abreast of the latest scholarly and pedagogical developments in the field of Teacher Education, and [bringing] those strategies to the Montana Writing Project for her colleagues to test, to question, and to try out."

In addition, UM English Department Chair, Casey Charles wrote in Heather's support: "Heather's work as a Montana Teacher is unsurpassed for commitment, rigor, and insistence on careful argument. . . . Heather brings her same passion and patience, her same commitment to dialogue and debate, her same dedication to writing proficiency and careful research to every level of education. I have . . . [witnessed, first hand,] her articulate engagement, willingness to listen, respect for all sides of an argument, and most importantly, her ability to teach students to think critically and to write coherently. . . . She is untiring in her advocacy for building bridges between diverse groups. . . . With intelligence, warmth, and dedication, she has and will continue to pursue the goals of equality, justice, and peace that motivate her unflagging spirit."

A further testament to her commitment to professional development, Bruce's publication experience includes the authorship or co-authorship of six books and numerous journal articles, chapter contributions, reviews, professional newsletter and newspaper articles, poems, and presentations.

As a consequence of these contributions, Bruce's résumé enumerates multiple honors and awards to which she will now add MATELA's Distinguished Educator Award, intended to honor language arts teachers who exemplify excellence in teaching and professional involvement.

Submitted by Donna L. Miller

"Looking back together, telling our stories to one another, we learn how to be on our own."

Lois Lowry, Looking Back

Writing Towards Memoir: 5 ways to begin

Collected by Christa Umphrey

"...you can begin to look for stories within your life. A story can be decades long or take place within a single day. A story may be found in your relationships with your parents, your siblings, your children, your friends, your pets, your house, the people you've dated, the gardener who mows your lawn, or the cobbler who soles your shoe. Stories are everywhere, and although you cannot touch them, you may see them like fireflies in your backyard; they fill the night with magic."

~ Tristine Rainer, *Your Life as Story*

One of the hardest parts of writing is always getting started. Where do I begin? What will I write about? Sometimes if we can help the writers we work with to simply get something down on paper, it gives them confidence to continue writing. Peter Elbow introduces his book *Everyone can Write* with some "hopeful truths" he insists upon, the first one being, "It is possible for anyone to produce a lot of writing with pleasure and satisfaction and without too much struggle." As we work with students to develop their writing, we need to continually give them experiences that show this to be true. Students do certainly need to learn to skillfully organize their work, but they also need a chance to do writing that isn't difficult or formal and whose sole goal isn't a large final product. They need opportunities to come up with ideas that they are actually interested in turning into well-crafted pieces of writing.

If students are working toward writing their own memoirs, having writing from a variety of prompts collected in a writers' notebook gives them a wealth of ideas to draw from. Or, if they are working with a mentor to write that person's memoir, most of these prompts would be easily adapted into oral questions. Additionally, sharing the responses to prompts like this is a very effective way to build community within the classroom.

1. Mapping Your Scars

Sometimes the events of our life leave physical scars on our body, and nearly every scar we have has a story behind it. Everyone has scars, and regardless of the writer's age, writing about how you got one of them is a good way to begin generating ideas. One way to do this is to begin with a paper blank except for an outline of a body. You can have students draw the body outline on their paper (even a stick figure works) or with younger writers you may want to give them a paper with the outline already printed on it. Next give writers a few minutes to draw in any scars they have. You may want to model this first to give them an idea of the many different types of scars they might include—scars are not always dramatic and not always from traumatic events. In my diagram I'd draw the slice across the bottom of my right foot I got wading in the creek beside my grandmother's house when I was ten as well as the nick on the inside of my thigh that resulted when a group of my friends hoisted me onto the high school roof when I was teenager. I'd include self-inflicted scars like the holes in my ears I couldn't wait to get when I was five or the one in my belly-button I thought was so necessary at seventeen. I'd include the stretch marks on my stomach from my first pregnancy at twenty as well as the lead that has been embedded in my palm since an argument with siblings over twenty years ago. After the writers you are working with spend a few minutes finding and identifying their own scars, have them choose one and spend a few minutes writing the story behind it. Possibilities to consider: How did you get it? Tell the story. What does the event say about who you are or how you live your life? About what you value? How do you feel about the scar? Is it something you try to hide? Are you self-conscious about it? Proud of it? What does *that* say about you?

2. Life is Short | Autobiography as Haiku

Take inspiration from *The Washington Post* and "find a way to give insight into your life in under 100 words." The weekly feature in their newspaper asks readers to tell about their life in this very abbreviated form. Since the space is so small and words are so limited, you don't want to focus on the experiences in life that everyone shares, but instead on what makes you unique. What has defined your life in contrast to those around you? If you only have a small space, what aspect of your life would you choose to highlight—your role as a big sister, your dedication to soccer, your life as an artist?

Here's one autobiography by Breanne, a college freshman:

Eight am to 10 pm, Monday through Saturday, and 8 am to 9 pm on Sundays. And then there are holidays, too. My life since age 16 has been retail. I have pleasant guests (yes here they are "guests" not customers) who smile and schmooze, and angry guests who throw phones and shout to the world "I will never shop here again!" And of course there's the cashier who calls in sick, even though I know she's just getting out of work to hang with her boyfriend. But back to school is over, so today we are setting Halloween. It's only early September, but here Christmas will set as soon as the candy and costumes are gone.

3. Those Who Don't

In Sandra Cisneros's rhythmic 133 word vignette "Those Who Don't" from her text *House on Mango Street* she writes as young girl frustrated by the outside perceptions of her neighborhood. After reading Cisneros' work, writers can create their own "those who don't" pieces about the places they come from. Have them consider: What are the outside world's perceptions of the place they call home? How are these perceptions different than what they think about the places themselves? Or, how do they think others view them personally? How is this different from what they think about themselves? Cisneros's work is also great to get students thinking about word choice and other stylistic aspects of writing. Below is a version ninth graders Clarissa and Michelle

wrote together with this prompt:

Those who don't know any better come onto our reservation with thoughts of us already in their heads. They think we're delinquents and alcoholics. They think we live in teepees and do rain dances. They are ignorant and just don't know how to look beyond the trash in the yard or the one-eyed Ford up on cinderblocks. You look at our reservation and see a third world country, children staving in their homes and teens walking the streets.

But that's not how we look at it. Its home and always has been. This is us and it hasn't always been like this. And we aren't scared. We know the old man with the headdress is our leader, and all the people around the fire are our relatives. All brown all around and we are protected. But watch us move onto another reservation and our eyes dart back and forth. We drive into one of your neighborhoods and the windows of our one-eyed Fords are rolled up and the doors are locked... yeah that's how it goes and goes. We have to watch our backs. Yeah that's just how it is.

4. Credos & Commandments

Sometimes it's effective to work backwards from ideas to uncover experiences to write about. One simple way is to have writers spend a few minutes thinking about what beliefs they have. The credo author Robert Fulghum has on his website is a clear, brief example that works well to spark ideas:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge-
That myth is more potent than history.
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts-
That hope always triumphs over experience-
That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death.

After showing an example or two and letting everyone write for 3-4 minutes, it is sometimes helpful to have everyone share one belief from their credo with the group, and suggest everyone else keep adding to their own lists if what people are saying sparks ideas. After everyone is finished, have writers choose one idea they are interested in thinking about a little more. The next prompt could be to simply explain why they hold that belief. Or, ask them to try to write for a few minutes about a specific event (or two) where they think the belief might have originated. Another approach that uses ideas to get at influential experiences is to have students come up with their own ten commandments. They don't all have to be as grandiose as "I'll never murder" or "I'll never steal," but they can be. Writers can be humorous or serious or both, and you can remind writers they don't need to come at the writing from a religious slant. After they narrow down some of their important beliefs they can go back and trace their origins. Below are the commandments Deanna Nixon (a university sophomore) came up with:

- 1) I'll always put my son first.
- 2) I'll never do drugs.
- 3) I'll never steal.
- 4) I'll never put anyone down.
- 5) I'll always love and be there for my friends
- 6) I'll always love and be there for my family
- 7) I'll never ask for money.
- 8) I'll never be a follower.
- 9) I'll never allow another to change who I am.
- 10) I'll always try to smile.

5. Rambling Autobiography

Linda Reif introduces this effective writing prompt in her book *100 Quickwrites* and gives her own example. The concept is simple. Take five minutes and list any details that come to mind about your life, from any point in your life, in any order. It's surprising how many pieces of your life (ripe for deeper investigation) you can capture with this exercise. As an example, here is my own rambling autobiography:

I always wanted to be a gymnast. When I was two my dad had me memorize and recite Robert Frost. Some days the rhythm of the lines still pulses through my mind: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep./ But I have promises to keep..." When I was little my mom made our clothes—often all the same style and color—easier to keep track of all the kids if they were all wearing the same thing. I always cheer for the Red Sox. The only pets I had in high school were goldfish; one night my friends ate them. My younger brother and I ran a movie theater when I was sophomore in high school. Just as I learned to talk I became obsessed with the aurora borealis; my grandmother became obsessed with hearing me say it. I skipped second grade. I wore brown corduroy knickers to my first day of third grade where I realized somewhere in second grade everyone else learned cursive. And how to spell. Sometimes I wore leg warmers-- eagerly. I miss the solitude of bustling cities. My daughter was born weighing nearly 10 pounds. I still have a scar where I burned my leg riding on my uncle's motorcycle when I was six. My wedding dress was black. For weeklong stretches I become nearly nocturnal. Sometimes I want to lie just to see if people will believe me. As I walked through bombed buildings in Serbia I began to understand what American means to those who don't live here. I have 18 (and counting) nieces and nephews. My Grandma Elda always wears bright red lipstick, talks too loud and fast, and forms immediate opinions. When I was seven I wanted to be just like her. I drink too much Mountain Dew. I still can't spell. I've nursed babies for three years of my life. Once my father's cigarette ashes started my hair on fire. Once I did it myself with fireworks. I have an irrational fear of rocks blinding me as they fly up from under my lawn mower. Every time I swam naked under the moon through the phosphorescence in Puget Sound, I felt like a mermaid.

On Writing Memoir

A bibliography of favorite resources from Montana Writing Project teacher consultants

Our next issue's bibliography will offer titles related to assessing writing. Share one or two of your favorites by e-mailing the title and author and a few sentences about the book to montana.writing.project@gmail.com. Please put "bibliography" in the subject line.

Memoir Texts

Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava*. Anchor, 2006. 352 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1400077762. \$14.95/ adult

I use selections from Abu-Jaber's book with my 7th grade writers. The Arab-American author teaches at Portland State and shares stories about growing up in Jordan as well as upstate New York, using family recipes that correspond to her memories. With humor and in a pleasantly accessible style, Abu-Jaber contrasts her father's food-drenched Arab culture to the rather bland Velveeta-cheese culture of her American mother. Her father struggles to find his place in America and drags the family back and forth from Jordan to the United States several times. The stories are light, but collectively leave a deep impression. Students' responses in their writer's notebooks range from food pieces to travel dreams, from pieces about their crazy uncles to firework mishaps. This book inspires great writing because students can analyze Abu-Jaber's style and, even if they can't identify with her culture, they can identify with the calamities of growing up.

Blunt, Judy. *Breaking Clean*. Vintage, 2003. 320 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0375701306. \$13.95/ adult

Blunt beautifully draws what it meant to survive ranch life on the Montana plains in the sixties and seventies and to exist as a female in her time and place. And then without taking anything away from the hard beauty of the land or the respectable toughness of the people who work it, she makes it clear how important it was for her own survival to figure out a way to break away. Blunt's is an important Montana memoir.

Conroy, Frank. *Stop Time*. Penguin, 1967 (reissue 1977). 288 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0140044461. \$15.00/ adult

Conroy is an excellent storyteller and each chapter reads like its own short story. He's a passionate writer and this memoir is filled with him as a writer exploring the world and his past.

Crutcher, Chris. *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography*. Greenwillow Harpertempest, 2003. 272 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0060502515. \$6.99/ young adult

For this text Crutcher turns the sharp wit and storytelling skills that have made his novels best sellers to his own life and the result is a memoir just as engaging as any of his fiction. The humorous events will keep middle schoolers engaged and the insight that Crutcher adds as he looks back on events will resonate with other adults.

Dumas, Firoozeh. *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. Random House, 2004. 224 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0812968378. \$12.95/ adult

Dumas's writing is light and humorous and also offers a viewpoint that many Americans probably never considered. It is also a collection of excellent models of what you can do with memoir. Each chapter can stand alone and many of them would appeal to high school students.

Fromm, Pete. *Indian Creek Chronicles: A Winter Alone in the Wilderness*. Picador Reprint edition 2003. 208 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0312422721. \$13.00/ adult

Fromm's memoir recounts the winter he spent at nineteen looking after two million salmon eggs planted in Indian Creek in the Idaho Wilderness. Fromm had grand ideas about being a mountain man, though he really had no idea about what it would take to spend the winter alone in the wilderness. There was no access except by snowmobile after November and for most of the winter Fromm had no contact with any other humans. The hunting and wilderness adventure in the story draws in many of the males that often aren't interested in reading most of the other texts we read in class, but Fromm's voice keeps those reading who have no interest in these types of activities.

Jiang, Ji-li. *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*. Collins, 1998. ISBN-13: 978-0064462082. 320 pages. \$6.99/ young adult

The book tells about Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in China from a young girl's perspective. Though she is devoted to the Revolution and its ideology, she soon discovers her grandfather was a landlord which causes her family continuous trouble. As the story unfolds we see Jiang transform from a young girl eager to serve the Party to an adolescent who begins to question what's going on around her. It's a fascinating look at how government ideology influences even its youngest citizens minds and lives.

Lesley, Craig. *Burning Fence: A Western Memoir of Fatherhood*. St. Martin's Press, 2006. 384 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0312426255. \$14.00/ adult

Lesley recreates the characters from his life so vividly your heart sinks with each successive tragedy they encounter, just as your admiration for them grows or your bewilderment about their actions increases. As his title indicts, what it takes to make it as a father and what it takes to survive in the west are both central to the book, but his story is so well-told it could appeal even to readers who've never been interested in either subject.

***Looking Back: a Book of Memories* by Lois Lowry. Houghton Mifflin (Lorraine Books), 1998 or Delacorte Books for Young Readers reprint, 2000. 192 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0385326995. \$14.95/ young adult**

This text was prompted by the constant question Lowry gets from her readers about where she gets her ideas. This memoir she wrote in response is a collection of loosely connected vignettes with accompanying black and white family photographs dating back to 1910. Sprinkled throughout, mainly as preface quotes to some of her chapters, are quotes from own Lowry's books which gives the effect of subtlety making the connections between her reality and the fiction she creates without drawing the focus away from her life experiences. The vignette format (with or without accompanying photos) is a great

model for students to follow, and many of Lowry's pieces (most from one to five paragraphs) could be useful as writing prompts for middle school to adult-aged writers.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Bad Boy*. Harpercollins, 2001/ Amistad 2002. 224 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0064472883. \$6.99/ young adult

Myers retells what it was like growing up in Harlem in the 1940s and 50s in the contrary position of always being ready for a fight or a good book. His story gives us a glimpse of what it was like to live in this time and place, and how his race and class shaped how he thought of himself and his options for the future. His storytelling is engaging and the idea of trying to figure out where you fit in and what you want to do with your life resonates with many adolescents.

Paulsen, Gary. *My Life in Dog Years*. Yearling, 1999. 144 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0440414711. \$5.99/ young adult

This is a great example of memoir and an easily accessible text for my sixth graders. I think students will like the stories about how each dog touched Paulsen's life in a unique way, because most students have (or have had) pets.

Qoyawayma, Polingaysi. *No Turning Back: A Hopi Indian Woman's Struggle to Live in Two Worlds*. University of New Mexico Press, 1963/ reprint 1977. ISBN-13: 978-0826304391. 188 pages. \$17.95/ adult

This as-told-to autobiography shares the experiences a Hopi woman who chose many aspects of the white American way of life over her own Native ancestry and traditions and the struggles (both physical and mental) that result from this choice. The text gives beautiful glimpses into the traditional Hopi world, but also shows Polingaysi eagerly choosing to attend both local schools and boarding schools run by white Christian missionaries. Before going to the school near her home, she was jealous of the other children who were captured and forced into the European style dresses and classrooms. Later she became a teacher, working with other Hopi children. Though you'd need to read some of the other accounts of Native experiences with boarding schools and Christian education to get a fuller picture, her account is interesting largely because her approach and feelings for those government and religious education systems was so different than most accounts. The "radical" teaching ways she is criticized for (like connecting her academic lessons to her students' Hopi knowledge and beliefs) also made me think about how much progress we've made in the well over half a century since she was teaching.

***Rising Voices* edited by Arlene Hirschfelder & Beverly Singer. Ivy Books, 1993. 144 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0804111676. \$6.99/ young adult**

This is an anthology for young people written by young Native Americans. The thin little collection of about seventy selections is organized topically into chapters like "Identity" and "Education" but within each chapter the genres vary—some poetry, some prose. Since there is a range of authors (and backgrounds and age levels) like any anthology there is also a range of quality, but there are selections that are excellent examples of memoir and a lot of short pieces that would be easily integrated into existing units.

Speigelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Penguin, 2003. ISBN-13: 978-0141014081. 296 pages/ \$28.00

This version contains both Speigelman's 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *My Father Bleeds History* and the second volume *Here My Troubles Begin*. Speigelman's memoir work was groundbreaking on many levels nearly fifteen years ago when it was published and it remains relevant today. His retelling of his father's experience in the Holocaust is engaging and many students are drawn to the comic book like format.

***When I Was Your Age* edited by Amy Ehrlich. Candlewick, 2001. 160 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0763610340. \$7.99/ young adult (there is also a 2nd volume)**

This is a collection of original stories about growing up written by many authors my students are familiar with. These pieces from the author's lives provide useful crafting techniques for writing memoir, but equally as important, they spark connections to the students' lived lives providing lively conversations both within and without the text. Avi's "Scout's Honor" captures glimpses into a young boy scout's heart and mind as he adventures with friends to camp out in a New York City park and learns valuable life lessons. Both poignant and hilarious, "Scout's Honor" is a great example of memoir at its best. Katherine Paterson, Laurence Yep, James Howe, Mary Pope Osborne and Walter Dean Myers are a few of the other authors with whom we can laugh and learn more about the craft of writing memoir.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Hill and Wang, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0374500016. 144 pages. \$9.00/ adult

Wiesel's classic memoir of the Holocaust has picked up new speed recently with the new edition and Oprah's book club endorsement. It's attention well-deserved. In just over 100 pages his bearing witness to the concentration camps of the Holocaust resonates as powerfully with high school students as it does with the rest of society.

Pedagogical Resources

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*. The Eighth Mountain Press, 2002. 224 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0933377509. \$14.95/ adult

Barrington has collected a lot of insight from other writers and the current scholarship about memoir writing to back up the points she makes in each chapter. Even if you aren't taken with her approach you come away with some insight into the conversations going on in the literary world about memoir. She also ends each chapter with a number of exercises that relate to that section's topic.

Bomer, Katherine. *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, 2005. 224 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0325006468. \$24.00

An excellent rationale and instruction manual for working on memoir with students. See Donna's review on page 27.

Bomer, Randy. *Time for Meaning: crafting literate lives in middle and high school.* Heinemann, 1995. ISBN: 0435088491. \$25.00

Though the text isn't solely about memoir, Bomer makes some excellent arguments for incorporating it into your teaching. See Heather's summary of his points in her article on page 14.

Dixon, Deborah. *Writing Your Heritage: A sequence of Thinking, Reading, and Writing Assignments.* National Writing Project, 1993.

This little book is just over sixty pages and basically just Dixon's explanation of the work she does to get her students writing about themselves and their family's heritage. But, reading it is definitely worth your time. Dixon's explanations are clear, she has some good writing exercises, and there are a number of valuable literature selections mentioned and referred to throughout the text.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition, 2002. ISBN-13: 978-0374528584. 184 pages. \$13.00

Gornick uses her own experience as a memoir writer to offer another valuable voice into the discussion of personal nonfiction writing. Her insight is interesting and offers more than the most commonly-read titles for further reading.

Hampl, Patricia. *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory.* W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. ISBN-13: 978-0393320312. 240 pages. \$13.95

Hampl combines the tasks of analyzing autobiography and writing it. She also spends a lot of time analyzing the writing of other memoirists: St. Augustine, Anne Frank, Sylvia Plath, Edith Stein, and Czeslaw Milosz. It's an interesting meditation on what makes a memoir worth being told, on worth being read.

Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir. Ed William Zinsser. Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 227 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0395901502. \$13.00/ adult

Zinsser's original volume was a collection of oral talks on writing memoir given at the New York City Library in 1986. With each additional edition he has added an additional chapter composed after interviewing other influential memoirists. Each chapter is one author sharing anecdotes and opinions about their process of writing memoir. Hearing the ideas of writers like Frank McCourt, Annie Dillard, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Toni Morrison and Russell Baker is helpful as you experiment with the writing process yourself.

Reif, Linda. *100 Quickwrites: Fast and Effective Freewriting Exercises that Build Students' Confidence, Develop Their Fluency and Bring Out the Writer in Every Student.* Scholastic, 2003. ISBN 0439458773 \$17.99

Though Reif's text isn't focused on memoir, many of the prompts she has collected direct students to do writing that is definitely personal in nature. Some of my favorites: Rambling Autobiography, When She was Fifteen, When I was young at the Ocean & Rylant's When I was Young in the Mountains, Where I live, Remembrance, School Days, My Grandmother's Hair.

Rainer, Tristine. *Your Life as Story: Discovering the 'New Autobiography' and Writing Memoir as Literature.* Tarcher, 1998. 368 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0874779226. \$15.95.

Rainer's book combines scholarship related to autobiographical writing with a lot of exercises to help writers begin to write their own memoir. In addition to the background on the development of the genre of memoir, there are useful exercises scattered throughout for everything from getting ideas to organization to characterization.

Roessing, Lesley. "What's in a Name? A Whole Lot of Talking, Researching, and Writing." *Voices from the Middle.* NCTE: Vol 14/ Number 2, December 2006.

This article published by NCTE is about a project where students research the origin and meaning of their names then create a project based on the information they found. It sounds like a great idea for an I-Search paper that could become part of a memoir unit.

“There is something sacred about a story. When we attend to children's stories, we establish probably the best foundation for their own future as learners. We therefore have to ask ourselves if stories are an essential element in our curriculum. When we exchange and honor stories, we give another a place to stand in our own small community. Everyone has a story to tell. Will they tell me? Will they tell you?”
Donald Graves, from *Testing is not Teaching*

Using Memoir to Create Communities of Meaning

A review of Katherine Bomer's *Writing a Life*

Donna L. Miller

Books like Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1989), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) elevated the status of memoir as a genre. Since then, memoir has not only found a place on classroom reading lists but also has gained public popularity. We seem fascinated by another's life, hungry to read the life stories of ordinary persons, eager to glean knowledge and perspective or to reflect on adversity and survival experiences.

Since memoir enjoys such a readership, the natural next step is to produce more texts, to model these writers, to share this art with students. Katherine Bomer's recent book *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning – and Triumph Over Tests* (Heinemann, 2005) provides a resource for teachers and writers wishing to learn and polish this art form, which, like sculpture, music, dance, and drama, offers an avenue for self-exploration and self-expression.

Bomer begins by saying, "Writing memoir is one way to recapture some of that sensual mystery and luxuriousness of time spent catching lady bugs and smelling their sharp grassy scent on our hands" (xiii). She goes on to define memoir and to share a rationale for teaching it: We write memoir

- ❖to break the silences surrounding who we are
- ❖to make meaning of our lives and, by doing so, to heal them
- ❖to awaken the "I" and come to know who the "I" is
- ❖to give the gift of personal and family history to loved ones
- ❖to record what must never be forgotten
- ❖to bear witness
- ❖to help us understand broader social and political realities.

From that purposeful, richly social justice list, Bomer gives us week-by-week plans, a map to guide teachers and writers through a genre study in memoir. She also encourages reading books in the genre one wishes to write. "When students read a genre with an eye toward making something like that genre, they read with a particularly analytical mind. They notice how the text is structured and what is possible in terms of point of view, use of time, even topic choice. . . . [They are] learning how . . . by imitating the masters" (40). Thus, these texts become instruction manuals in the art of writing and provide crucial practice for a writer. Bomer mentions several mentor memoir titles appropriate for this front-loading process.

In addition, Bomer suggests a series of useful activities to "help students go to the places where the nerves and skin remember everything (49), to call their memories out to play" (56), to locate "landmark moments" (66) in their lives, to generate grist for the memoir mill. Many of these strategies honor ethnicity, culture, language, religion, landscapes, and family. Everything from photographs to object collections to lullabies and smells becomes pregnant with meaning, important pieces from life's museum.

Once these memories are collected, we select, layer, interpret, and make meaning of them. We study these moments, looking for patterns and asking reflective questions to arrive at a possible theme, stance, or angle. Then, we shape the story, finding an appropriate structure while focusing on scenes told with specific detail, dialogue, and conflict. Again, Bomer tells us how with tips and steps and models.

Since revision is the heart of the writing process, Bomer spends considerable time talking about effective conferencing techniques to provide critical feedback to writers. She also shares "five sledge hammers and nineteen nails for making a memoir even better" (159).

And while memoir serves multiple purposes in and of itself, Bomer argues that students can draw on their best memoir writing to answer test prompts. She speaks of "teaching the test as yet another genre with its own rules, elements of craft, purposes, and audience" (177). Based on the premise that "when children become makers of a certain genre, they become better readers of that genre, and vice versa" (179), she encourages students to write test prompts, make practice responses, rehearse test conditions, and thereby demystify the test genre, removing the fear factor.

Finally, Bomer claims that through memoir, students get to know their life material. "The next step of the test preparation process is to take a few pieces of this life material and begin to shape it into well-written vignettes (183). . . . The point of this exercise is to prepare one or two memoir nuggets that will be fine-tuned and shaped to fit practice test prompts" (184). Memoir works so well for the test genre since "scorers love essays that make them smile, that have a young person's voice, with words and phrases that pop out from the mound of papers. . . . They also appreciate a response that brings tears to their eyes or that makes them remember their own childhood or that makes them see the world in a new way" (184). Bomer expresses confidence that memoir material will fit any test prompt.

With all these purposes, perhaps memoir really can repair the world. *Writing a Life* gives us the inspiration to try.

Montana Writing Project

MWP is one of 195 sites in the National Writing Project (NWP) network.

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