

# **Memoir as a Gateway to Fiction Writing: Using Our Own Remembrances to Create Believable Characters**

by Elouise E. White-Beck  
Taylor Allderdice High School

**Overview**

**Rationale**

**Strategies**

**Objectives**

**Anticipatory Set**

**Introductory Material**

**Narrative**

**The Memoirists**

**Classroom Activities**

**Annotated Bibliography/Sources**

**Appendices**

*We are the sum of our memories. Sometimes we don't acknowledge the memories and sometimes we are not aware of the effect our past has on our present and future. Fictional characters are born of memory. Writers use what they know of human nature from their own experiences whether they be personal, observed, or read about in books. Memory is key to writing fiction and vital to creating believable characters.*

## **Overview**

This unit is designed for a high school creative writing class made up of students of varying abilities in grades 9–12. The unit will encompass twenty class days but can be spread out allowing for writing time outside of class. In teaching creative writing at the high school level, a teacher faces many challenges. Some material may be unsuitable for students under eighteen and some memories may be too painful to be acknowledged in a high school classroom. Memoir can be a way to deal with some difficult memories, but at this age it is important to do so without having to delve into the most devastating experiences of a teenager's life. That can wait until college or graduate school. Most students like to talk about themselves and some of them like to write about themselves. For the few who say they have nothing good in their lives this becomes an obstacle but not an insurmountable one. I usually ask my students to write about a "difficult" moment or a "trouble" incident rather than the worst memory they have or the biggest trouble they've been in. I don't believe I am equipped to deal with teenagers writing and talking about being molested by older relatives or what happened when they tried to OD on Halloween. (Before I was an English teacher I taught acting to teenagers and children and heard both of those topics.)

The writing of memoir is an act of catharsis, much like the telling of the story that many unsuccessful suicides do (see above) or the witnessing at AA meetings. Writing out all your worries and cares does wonders for you. Yet, there must be a carefully

trodden path for those of us dealing with teenagers. While encouraging them to explore their feelings, their memories, and their scars from the past we must be extremely delicate in handling the traumas of their lives. This unit will illustrate how to skim the surface of memory to gain insight into creating believable fictional characters while inviting those who are ready to dive straight in.

### **Rationale**

All students have memories. What we already have in our brains is what we use to create new things. In order to create fictional characters, settings, dialogue, and themes we must have some of those in our heads to borrow from. Instead of just asking a student to create a character, ask him first to examine his own character. Rather than write about an early experience in the life of his character, he can write about his own early experience and then give that experience to his character in whole or in part.

Fictionalizing our memories does not diminish them. Sometimes reorganizing memories helps us to make sense of them and what they mean to us. Our constant struggle in life is to find meaning and we construct personal meaning from the parts of our experiences that we fit together to make a pleasing, satisfying—or at least understandable—picture.

In Elizabeth Bomer's book, *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests*, the author spends time preparing the reader to start writing by explaining a lot about the process through examples from her own students. Here, again, is another example of someone making sense of her life by writing about it, by chronicling her experiences into a form that is satisfying and whole. Azar Nafisi struggled to make sense of her life in Tehran when she wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Her experiences were so devastating that it took writing out her pain in this book to make some sense of it. Examining excerpts from Nafisi's book as well as those of writers from a variety of cultures will give the students a broad view of memoir writing.

### **Strategies**

This unit can be adapted to any grade or curriculum, but my focus will be on Creative Writing 1, a one-semester elective class offered to ninth through twelfth graders of all abilities. Learning to document their own lives first will serve to instruct students as to how to proceed when developing their own characters. Students will begin by defining the term memoir, listening and taking notes from the teacher's lecture, and reading very short excerpts from a number of memoirs (see Teacher Reading List). In twenty class days, students will read and study memoir through handouts provided by the teacher, they will construct their own personal memoirs, and they will create fictional creatures and learn to infuse these characters with information from their personal writings. These explorations will help students to understand different points of view and how these varied viewpoints can report or distort information from the original memory depending on the writer's goal. This technique will enable students to write real characters using parts of their own realities.

To present a wide scope of experience, students will read excerpts from memoirs of writers from different cultures. This broad base will help students to see beyond what they already know and will spur them to delve deeper into research they may need to

write their own stories. Students will also respond in writing to what they read and view with assignments that will fulfill the Pittsburgh Public Schools required portfolio. The portfolio documents can be adapted to suit other school districts' needs. These video written assignments will be found in the appendices at the end of this unit.

## **Objectives**

The students will be able to:

Gain an understanding of memoir as a style of writing and learn the history and goals of writing memoirs.

Develop an understanding of style and objectives writers pursue when writing memoirs.

Recognize the rich variety of experience in the world as they read parts of memoirs from writers from around the world.

Interpret what they have written in their personal memoirs and be able to infuse this information into their created characters.

Effectively compare readings to discern points of view.

Respond in writing to several prompts on what they have read and written. (See appendices for worksheets.)

## **Anticipatory Set**

To get ready to embark on the writing process, I will first engage the students in telling stories. I will begin by telling them a story about my childhood and then invite them to share similar memories. This should last one class period. At this time, it will be possible to note which students are more forthcoming than others. There will be some who will want to tell more than one story and some who may not speak at all.

Following this oral sharing I will ask students (during the second class meeting) how they felt while telling their stories and hearing stories told by their classmates. This should segue easily into a discussion on why people write memoirs which will take place during the second class. The following components will be the guidelines for the teaching unit:

### *Memoir Writing*

In this section students will be given a definition of *memoir* and many examples. The memoir writing will be discussed in full in the Introductory Material

### *Creating a Character*

Once students have written their own memoirs, they will transition to creating a fictional character for their semester work. In this part of the unit students will complete several assignments designed to build their characters (see Appendices).

### *Fiction Writing*

After firmly grounding their fictional characters in real life observations, students will move forward to place their creations in situations to help them develop (see **Appendices C, D, E, F, & G**).

## **Introductory Material**

Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone

like me. Not only because I've never written anything before,  
but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone  
else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old  
schoolgirl.—*Anne Frank*, 1940

Katherine Bomer on memoir writing

In her book *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests*, Katherine Bomer discusses early memoir writers. Among those she mentions are St. Augustine and Michel de Montaigne, although she points out that the genre is generally credited to Americans, particularly Benjamin Franklin. Other cultures and subcultures have also made great contributions. In my own research I have discovered Olaudah Equiano in the eleventh grade textbook. At eleven years of age he and his sister were kidnapped and sold to a series of slave owners along the west coast of Africa before ending up in Barbados.

In the ninth grade, students read Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (which I have taught in past years). In my other searches, I turned up Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Clifton L. Taulbert's *When We Were Colored*, Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, and a recent collection of letters between Rachel Carson and her longtime friend Dorothy Freeman. In my own library, I rediscovered *Having Our Say*, by the Delaney sisters, Agatha Christie's autobiography (which I have read countless times), *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and Anne Frank's diary. My most recent find is Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* which came to me via my monthly book club. This book club is wonderful because I am exposed to a lot of books that I would not have found on my own. I recall Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as a wonderful read I remember from childhood. The used copy I ordered arrived recently. It's a hardback from a school library and I find it sad that it was a discard. For this seminar, Nafisi's book was listed along with Bomer's text, Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man*, and a little gem called *Memoir of James Jackson, Aged 6 Years and 11 Months*. This charming recollection of a little African American boy from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century who died before his seventh birthday was penned by his teacher, Miss Susan Paul.

Bomer moves from identifying early memoirs to the definition *memoir*. She quotes Phillippe Lejeune's essay "The Autobiographical Pact" for the definition:

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person  
concerning his own existence, where the focus is his  
individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (Bomer 5)

Following the definition she lists seven reasons for writing memoirs. These are discussed as subsections which I have listed below with short examples from some of the books I've read. While memoirs rarely deal with just one of the reasons, each of the above-named reasons will be explored through one or more of the books I have researched in preparation to write this unit.

*Breaking the Silence*

Agatha Christie comments in the Foreword of her autobiography that she is not planning a comprehensive chronological study of her life: "What I want is to plunge my hand into a lucky dip and come up with a handful of assorted memories" (Christie xii). There doesn't seem to be any particular time that writers decide to write their memoirs.

Sometimes authors just feel they have reached a time in their lives to break the silence.

For Christie, whose life was long and rich, there were, of course, some bad memories, but the tone of her book is joyous throughout and it is always a welcome book to reread.

Other writers seem to be writing out their demons. For them, breaking the silence allows them to scream on paper. This is the case with Jeannette Walls whose *The Glass Castle* reveals an unbelievable childhood, all the more remarkable for her success in life as well as the success of two of her three siblings.

#### *Making Meaning and Healing*

All memoirists want to make meaning of their lives but not all of them feel the need for healing. Walls' book starts out this way. She recounts episodes of her childhood that seem horrific to the reader with a casual tone. She and her siblings often didn't have enough food and the children were neglected. The beginning of the book shows three-year-old Jeannette cooking hot dogs for herself and getting badly burned. Later on she fell out of the car on a road trip and sat by the side of the road for quite a while with a broken nose until the family came back to find her. Ultimately, though, Walls' need to come to terms with her parents' lifestyle after she became a successful adult proves that writing out her memories had a cathartic affect on her.

Maya Angelou had a tougher time as a child. Although she was loved and generally well cared for, she endured being raped by her mother's boyfriend when she was only eight.

#### *Awakening the "I"*

Agatha Christie attacks this aspect head on. She remembers the solemn little girl with the sausage curls playing railroad stops in the garden with her hoop. She talks about her grandson Mathew discovering himself and muttering to himself, This is Mathew going down the stairs. What struck me when I started reading Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, the first of her five autobiographical volumes, was how I felt the same way as I feel every time I read Agatha Christie. Both of these women transport the reader to the Victorian Age (they were born only eighteen years apart, Christie in England and Beauvoir in France) and recount daily life as privileged children. Neither family was wealthy but both families enjoyed servants and could afford to give their children good educations. Beauvoir went on to gain fame and acclaim as a feminist existentialist writer while Christie became world famous for her detective stories.

#### *The Gift of Personal and Family History*

The value of writing to provide history is something writers often do unconsciously (see Anne Frank's quotation at the beginning of this section). People want to remember for many reasons but the rest of the world benefits from being welcomed into the time period and culture of the writer. Sandra Cisneros takes her readers to a variety of houses in which she lived in poverty as a young Hispanic girl in the fifties. Esmeralda Santiago does the same with her journey from Puerto Rico to New York. Could I recommend *The House on Mango Street* over *When I Was Puerto Rican*? There is no comparison beyond both girls being Spanish-speaking and growing up in families with siblings and not a lot of money. Cisneros tackles her story in a series of poetic vignettes while Santiago writes

a descriptive narrative. Cisneros writes movingly about the death of her grandfather and the effect it had on her

*What Must Never Be Forgotten*

Making one's life and times a matter of public record seems to be the impetus for some memoirists. *Having Our Say, When We Were Colored*, and *Memoir of James Jackson* all deal with memories of times in America that chronicle both momentous events and everyday triumphs. The Delaneys grew up and through the Civil Rights Movement and their struggles included fighting gender bias as well. Taulbert's book offers vignettes of his boyhood and his teen years, giving the reader a taste of his era and his realization of how he and his peers fit into the world, and little James Jackson's short life is a charming testament to his youth and innocence.

*To Bear Witness* and *To Understand Social and Political Realities*

These two belong together. Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel bear witness to the Nazi death camps. Azar Nafisi brings political unrest in Tehran to the minds of Western readers, Kingston writes from the perspective of a Chinese American woman dealing with clashing cultures, and Keller ranks with Beauvoir as a philosopher. Keller wrote from the unique perspective of her experience coming through three of her five senses. This led to her introspective style; she had plenty of solitude in which to process all she learned from her teacher and through books.

Bomer's unit plan encompasses six weeks and is intended for younger students. My unit will entail twenty class days but will be spread out over two months during which time other assignments will allow breathing space between the memoir writing. I have found interspersing character development with other kinds of exercises to be helpful. Sometimes the characters need to "age" or "ferment" for awhile, so I structure my classes with different time-outs during which we write things that have nothing to do with their characters. It's kind of like take a vacation from the "work" and coming back feeling refreshed.

The nature of memoir is something that can be presented to high school students more readily than to younger writers. The revelation of the nature of memoir can be approached through the Aristotelian method of questioning. Ask the students what they think. Through asking them leading questions they will own the answer even though you, the teacher, are directing them toward the essence of the answer you want. Of course, you may learn something yourself. I always do. Yesterday I asked students in my senior English class what their earliest memory was. After several students recounted their memories from around age five an interesting thing happened. Students who had already told their memories suddenly seemed to remember an event that happened even *earlier*. They were eager to share these newly-remembered stories. I can only surmise that the act of trying to remember actually helps a person to delve deeper into the memory.

Bomer suggests storytelling to begin. This can be a valuable tool (see **Classroom Activities**).

**Narrative** --*The Memoirists*

The following section examines several of the memoirists in more detail. I included choices that encompass both male and female characters, people who lived in different time periods, and people of different cultures.

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano

As a child, Equiano was kidnapped and shipped off to be sold as a slave. His fear was enormous but he was somewhat relieved when the others on board the ship told him he was not to be eaten, but rather to be sold as a worker. Equiano's command of English is evident in his writing style as he recounts these events:

I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among so many people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves (Equiano 95).

His descriptions of the crowding and the stench on the ship compare with the conditions endured by Wiesel and his fellow prisoners. They were forced to eat inadequate food and stay cooped up below unless the captain allowed them to enjoy the fresh air on deck. His memories of the voyage are concerned with three things: whether he would be killed by his captors, how terrible the pestilential atmosphere was down in the hold, and the dearth of food. This last one is illustrated in a story about how the crew caught too many fish for them to eat and instead of giving the leftovers to Equiano and the other captives they threw them overboard.

Upon reaching Barbados, Equiano was herded with the others to be sold. Here the worst part is recounted, that of families being broken up and sold to different masters:

Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which . . . thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery (Equiano 97).

The narrative itself is remarkable since most slaves (and freedmen) were not educated. Equiano's eloquence and mastery of the language are a great accomplishment and stress the importance of keeping memories alive, bearing witness, and passing on one's experience to one's descendants.

*Memoir of James Jackson, Aged 6 Years and 11 Months* by Miss Susan Paul

The first half of the book is about Susan Paul, her world, and her decision to record little James Jackson's life and accomplishments. The second half is the actual narrative, valuable to modern readers as a glimpse into a world few of us know anything about. In the early 1800s, this African American child was lucky enough to live in the North and be educated. Ever the scholar, young James loved his studies and was dedicated and pious. When he was about to die, he only looked forward to meeting God in heaven. His

teacher felt a need to document this short life, perhaps as a means of keeping his memory alive.

*The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller

Most Americans know what they know about Helen Keller through William Gibson's play, *The Miracle Worker*. Reading Helen's own words is a revelation. Once she acquired language, Helen had a rich inner life about which she wrote in several volumes, but in this first one she recalls the many discoveries she made as a child and the greater discoveries possible after she was able to communicate with others. Hers is a story of self-revelation and an invitation for the rest of the world to see into hers.

*Moments of Being* by Virginia Woolf

The most remarkable thing about this volume is that it is unpolished and raw. Woolf's typewritten notes serve as a basis for the work which is divided into three parts: the first is a letter to her nephew telling him about his mother (her sister) in a nostalgic voice, as though it is a eulogy. One of the things about life that bothered Woolf was the ephemeral nature of life. She felt that it was necessary to speak about people she knew who had died to keep them alive somehow. She first touches on the subject in the first section of the book: "Written words of a person who is dead or still alive tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life" (Woolf, 36). This troubled her because she believed that simply describing a person could not evoke the deep feelings one can have through being personally acquainted with the person. This persisted throughout her life. Losing her mother at fifteen, Woolf clung to her memories, particularly her earliest memory:

This [memory] was of red and purple flowers on a black ground—  
My mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose.  
(Woolf 64)

Detail is everything here. An unimaginative mind would have simply reported sitting on her mother's lap on the train. Woolf brings us to her world. I find myself picturing the print of the dress and the size of the flowers and wondering whether the fabric was coarse or silky. The more detail, the more our visualization works to create the whole picture. Her next memory is a combination of sight and sound. She remarks that she cannot separate the two, writing about "the murmur of bees" and "the apples . . . red and gold" (Woolf 66). The combination of the senses completes the experience for her as well as for her reader.

She recounts a particularly unpleasant memory about her stepbrother feeling her all over: "'I remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes" and "I remember how I hoped he would stop" (Woolf 67). She thinks that it was instinct that made her feel uncomfortable, that she was one with all women of all time. "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago . . ." (Woolf 67).

Back to the nature of life, Woolf discovers that a great deal of life is lived unconsciously. In any given day it is impossible to recall every moment. You may know with whom you lunched, but you may not remember exactly what you ate or your entire conversation. Memory sifts out the inconsequential parts for us and we are left with indelible memories of important times and people and scraps of other insignificant things.

Woolf believed that the entire world was a work of art and that we and all of our experiences are part of that art. Sometimes the events were of no real value, they just were. Her father remarked how absurd it was to be so engrossed in helping Virginia with her sailboat in the park. They thoroughly enjoyed themselves yet the event itself was not momentous. This is what struck Woolf—the *moments of being*. These were the times that one remembered and that made one remember those who passed away and the joy and the love in those relationships.

A truly chilling memory is that of her mother's death. Immediately after she died, Virginia was taken in to see her mother. She kissed her cheek and it was still warm. Days later, though, when she had to kiss her mother for the last time she found her cheek as cold as iron. This was a shock that she never forgot.

I have my own "moment of being." Much less profound than Woolf's, it is all the more remarkable to me because of its ordinariness. I was standing on the concrete at the bottom of our back steps while my mother was unlocking the doors. I was about seven years old and we had just returned from "out in the country" where her best friend Betts lived with her husband and seven children. The youngest was two years older than I and was my closest friend. I remember standing still and thinking that I wanted to freeze that moment and remember it because I was happy. The summer evening was warm and I'd had a wonderful time with my friend so I "bookmarked" it in my memory.

Woolf says that when the writing urge comes upon her she feels that it is "poetry coming true," and that "the pen has got the scent" (Woolf 93). When the urge comes to write is not predictable. While working on a biography of a colleague, Woolf was struck with thoughts of her sister. She notes that "The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river" (Woolf 98).

The third part of the book is made up of pieces from a memoir club Woolf attended. I found it interesting that such a club existed. What a great idea!

*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* by Simone de Beauvoir

At the outset, the story of Simone's childhood is a charmingly told story of a little girl in pre-WWI France. As a young child, Simone was very much her own person. When she was read a moralizing tale in order to chastise her for some minor misbehavior, she realizes: "I became aware of myself as a person of some standing." At the end of the story she realizes that she has been led on by the overly dramatic moralizing in the tale and she experiences this further revelation: "I suspected that literature had only very dubious connections with the truth" (Beauvoir 14).

She was always analyzing the world and her place in it. On trying to determine the right and wrong of things she perceived that "White was only rarely totally white, and the blackness of evil was relieved by lighter touches" (Beauvoir 20). Growing up in a very Catholic family, Simone was a devout Catholic and an obedient child. When she misbehaved and displeased her mother she felt she no longer had any right to live. Indeed, the meaning of life and how one should spend one's days on earth became a

puzzle to Simone. For a child, and later a teenager, who spent a great deal of her time thinking, she nearly drove herself crazy. She reached a partial answer to the question of what her life was for when she began to teach her younger sister to read.

I felt I was at last creating something real. I was not just imitating grown-ups: I was on their level, and my success had nothing to do with their indulgence. . . I, too, was being of service to someone.  
(Beauvoir 48—49)

While still a child, Simone wrestled with reconciling her religious beliefs with her own logical thoughts. She had particular trouble with being part of the whole with God because she didn't remember it.

In the supernatural void there floated . . . myriads of the invisible, impalpable souls awaiting incarnation. I had been one of them, but had unfortunately forgotten everything about that state of bliss. . . I realized, in dreadful anguish, that this absence of memory was the same as extinction, nothingness . . . (Beauvoir 52).

In retrospect, the adult Simone put into words what the child had felt but had not the language to express. Noting her famous liaison with twentieth century thinkers like Sartre it is not surprising that she should recall this feeling with the words she chose.

Another troubling concept for her was the reality of twins. She had her sister, but they were separate people. She said of twins: "A twin would have deprived my existence of that very thing that gave it value: its glorious singularity" (Beauvoir 64). Underlining this need to be unique is Simone's observation that her stories kept her life from dissolving into oblivion. If she wrote them down they existed and she had successfully, "snatched them out of nothingness" (Beauvoir 74).

As Simone aged and completed more of her education, she came to question more and more of what she had taken for granted. She reached a crisis of faith and discovered that she had no faith in God. This terrified her for she felt completely alone. She was also terrified that her mother would find out. Shortly after this, she read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and came to grips with Eliot's own beliefs, the religion of humanity. Simone never lost faith in people, just in the Divine being.

The most telling line in all of this first volume of the five she would write in her lifetime is this: "By writing a work based on my own experience I would recreate myself and justify my existence" (Beauvoir 150). That she continued to do while discovering more about herself and the world. Living in a time period when women were accepted to be inferior to men, it is amazing that Simone did not see that she was at least as intelligent as the men around her. She blithely relates taking exams in philosophy and passing and treats studying like a day in the park. Her volume of work attests to her talent and brilliance, yet when she thought about gender inequality, it was in relation to sexual experience, what men were allowed to do and what women were ostracized for doing.

One last touch worth mentioning is that when Simone had a difficult problem she sought to solve it through writing: “In my diary I had long conversations with myself” (Beauvoir 202).

*Agatha Christie: an Autobiography* by Agatha Christie

Christie is known far and wide as the queen of the murder mystery, but reading about her childhood and the rest of her life is at least as interesting as any one of her mysteries. Born into an upper middle-class family in England to an English mother and an American father, Agatha Miller was the third and last child in a very loving family. Born at the end of the Victorian age, Christie experienced both world wars, first as a nurse, and later as a pharmacy assistant. She makes her readers feel as though they really know her immediate family. She refers to herself as the slow one. She wasn't considered feeble-minded, but both her mother and sister had nimble wits that served them well in company. Agatha, herself, was always tongue-tied and could never think of an appropriate remark until much later. When she was about ten years old, she was taken on a horseback outing with her older sister and her father. As a special “present,” the guide skewered and pinned a large butterfly to Agatha's hat. She felt it flapping and suffering but could not say a word because she couldn't stop crying. Her anguish at hoping someone would notice the poor butterfly became an indelible memory to her. When they finally reached home, her mother instantly caught on and Agatha finally felt relief:

Oh, the glorious relief, the wonderful relief it is when somebody knows what's in your mind and tells it to you so that you are at last released from that long bondage of silence, that seems so inescapable. (Christie 85)

The most wonderful thing about Christie's memoir is that she had such a long and productive life. Even though there were sad times, her personality shines through the narrative and her decision to write later in life gives her writing a mature perspective. She can laugh at herself and look back on things in a way that lets the reader in on the joke. When she was being shown around museums by a dear friend of her mother's, all she could think about was whether or not they'd have time for high tea before her train was due:

There was just time to stuff me with chocolate and cakes before catching our train—May expatiating at length about all the glorious pictures, and I agreeing with her fervently as I pushed in mouthfuls of cream and coffee icing . . . (Christie 217)

Near the end of the narrative Christie brings us to the present and gives the reader a sense of calm satisfaction. When I read the book for the first time, over twenty years ago, I wanted to grow old as she did. Now when I reread it (as I often do) I hope I am succeeding. The biggest effect this book has had on me was encouraging me to write. While I haven't yet produced anything approaching a memoir, I have come up with several lucky dips.

*Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, by Sarah L Delany, A. Elizabeth Delaney, and Amy Hill Hearth

Sarah (Sadie) and A. Elizabeth (Bessie) Delany decided to write about their first hundred years with the help of Amy Hill Hearth. These two “colored” ladies lived from the 1880s to the 1990s and experienced more than an average lifetime of events. Neither married and they lived together and cared for their mother until her death. Growing up in a family of many brothers and sisters, the girls received good educations and became employed with distinction. Sadie was the first non-white teacher to teach home economics at a high school in New York City and Bessie was one of the very few black, female dentists with her own practice.

Their temperaments were as different as can be. While Sadie was “Sweet Sadie,” her sister was referred to as Queen Bess. She offers this thought on her long life:

If you asked me the secret to longevity, I would tell you that you have to work at taking care of your health. But a lot of it's attitude. I'm alive out of sheer determination, honey! Sometimes I think it's my meanness that keeps me going. (Delany 17)

When Amy Hill Hearth came to interview the ladies she ended up staying quite awhile, realizing that there was more than a magazine story to be told. The chapters are sometimes told by Bessie and sometimes by Sadie. In addition, Hearth fills in with chapters of their family history. She recounts how the girls' father was born into slavery to “house” slaves and how he and his siblings all learned a trade.

As with many memoirs, this tale is full of everyday occurrences and one-time memories that somehow stuck in their minds. It's a conversational book that can be picked up and put down as though the reader is visiting with friends.

Testaments like this one bring the past out of mothballs and give today's readers a look at another pocket of history that has been hidden for too long.

*When We Were Colored* by Clifton L. Taulbert

Clifton L. Taulbert transports his reader to a different world with his recollections of his boyhood as a “colored” boy. His vivid descriptions bring the sun, heat, and general surroundings to life. His early memories include weekly trips with his grandfather, highlighted with buying hot French bread and frozen custard. Throughout the book, Taulbert emphasizes the feeling and need for community. The link was the colored church. Living with his grandmother, Taulbert vividly remembers Sunday mornings:

When I got to the kitchen Ma Ponk would be moving around the black iron stove in her starched white dress. She was on the Mothers' Board of the church, and as a church mother, she was required to wear white to Sunday services. Ma Ponk made sure her dress was hand starched and washed in rainwater to ensure that extra whiteness. (Taulbert 92)

He further describes the majesty of the Sunday services through descriptions of the ushers and the preaching. Sundays were a time when all the colored people shed their

workday uniforms and got dressed to the nines. Following the services, people shared fellowship with neighbors they didn't have time to see throughout the week:

As a small boy, Taulbert's influences were the church and his elder relatives and neighbors. Two of the events that were highlights of his youth were the revival days and a special celebration called Annual Day. People from all around were sure to show up and those who had moved away returned for Annual Day. When it was revival time, young Cliff philosophized about the timing: "It seemed as if God always waited until the end of the cotton-chopping season and right before the picking started to prompt the church to get the revival fires started" (Taulbert 100).

Education was of paramount importance. Even though the elders didn't have much opportunity, they stressed to Cliff's generation the necessity of a good education. This was during the time of "separate but equal" and Taulbert recalls their acceptance of this policy.

Even though the white high school was only blocks from where I lived, I traveled more than one hundred miles round trip each day to the colored high school in Greenville. (Taulbert 146)

Taulbert credits the support from his family and community for his success in life. While he went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees and become an author, he never forgot his childhood and what it meant to him. In 1996, a successful film was made of his book entitled *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

*Night* by Elie Wiesel

The title tells what Wiesel feels about the world. His is a world of eternal night. As a teenager, Elie and his father were separated from the rest of the family and sent to a series of concentration camps. Long after his rescue, he dredged up the horrific memories forever etched in his memory. Throughout the journeys on the train, the marches, and the grueling hours of labor in the camps, Elie's father supported and sustained him and the loss of his father so near to freedom made Elie's rescue an empty one: "I did not weep, and it pained me that I should not weep. But I was out of tears" (Wiesel 112).

In the foreword to the book Wiesel tries to explain what drove him to write it: "Convinced that this period in history would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness" (Wiesel viii). Here is his conscious effort to record what he knew must be remembered and handed down to future generations. In the remainder of the foreword, he struggles to come to grips with how he could write about an experience that he felt he had no words to describe. The completeness of the dehumanization, the utter despair of those who lived through it and watched countless others die; these obstacles seemed insurmountable. But Wiesel persevered and produced a stark memoir that is studied as part of many high schoolers' curriculum.

When they were packed into the train, one woman, Mrs. Schacter, went crazy and ranted about seeing fire and smoke. After many hours of this tirade, the others in the train car couldn't take it and did whatever they could to shut her up. But when they

reached the camp, her vision had come true: “We stared at the flames in the darkness. A wretched stench floated in the air” (Wiesel 28).

Thus began a new existence that the young boy had to learn quickly. Of the incidents he felt merited recording was his trip to the dentist. The man, a Jew from Czechoslovakia, had broken yellow teeth but took pity on Elie when he said he didn’t feel well. He wanted to remove the gold crown from one of Elie’s teeth but he was dealing in the black market and was thrown in jail before he could steal Elie’s crown. The boy’s response shows how his thinking had changed since his arrival in the camp: “I felt no pity for him. In fact, I was pleased with what was happening to him: my gold crown was safe. It could be useful to me one day, to buy something, some bread or even time to live” (Wiesel 52).

Pushing away the horrors of the camp was not always possible. The prisoners were forced to watch executions. Once he was forced to watch a multiple execution in which a child was one of the party to be hanged. The child was lightweight and continued to breathe for a full half hour. After dinner that night, Elie reported that “. . . the soup tasted of corpses” (Wiesel 65).

Perhaps the most poignant of his memories is the night when Elie, his father, and many other prisoners were sleeping during their long walk to a new camp. A young man named Juliek began playing his violin one night. He played Beethoven and Elie says, “it was as if Juliek’s soul had become his bow” (Wiesel 95). He says he will never forget Juliek; neither will his readers: “When I awoke at daybreak, I saw Juliek facing me, hunched over, dead. Next to him lay his violin, trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse” (Wiesel 95). Memories like this stay with us. Not only did Wiesel immortalize this violinist, all those who read *Night* will always remember him as well.

In his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech, Elie offers this:

This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude as one who has emerged from the Kingdom of Night. (Wiesel 120)

*Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

Here is another book that many of us encountered in school or through one of the filmed versions. Anne’s confessional style of writing is charming in its simplicity. Though she names her diary Kitty, she often philosophizes about many things in the world. She reminisces about what she misses from the outside world, she wonders at the ugliness and nonsensical nature of the war, and she delves deep into her own heart. Among the poignant and moving messages we have from her is her belief in the good of the human race and her optimism for the future. Her writing brings to mind many of our other memoirists who have conversations with themselves on paper. No wonder this book has been an inspiration to all the generations of students who have read it since her father discovered it and shared her story with the world.

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston

The second section is about a warrior and is a cautionary tale. Chinese culture is related to young Kingston through a terrifying tale about how a woman in a Chinese family will

put herself and her entire family to shame if she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. This cautionary tale opens Kingston's book:

The villagers broke in the front and the back doors at the same time, even though we had not locked the doors against them. Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. We stood together in the middle of our house, in the family hall with the pictures and tables of the ancestors around us, and looked straight ahead. (Kingston 4)

This short excerpt is part of a two and a half page story told to young Maxine by her mother just after she had begun to menstruate. Her mother hoped to impress upon her the importance of guarding her virtue. Kingston speculated on what must have happened after the raid. She'd been told what her aunt had done afterwards and her decision to end her life and the baby's by drowning in the family well:

Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys. (Kingston 15)

In ending the first chapter of her book, Kingston remarks that she doesn't even know her aunt's name. It had been forbidden to speak it or to refer to the fact that her father had once had a sister. She says that after fifty years of silence about this "ghost" she is the one devoting several pages to her, reviving her. This way of thinking about the dead is similar to Woolf's; both women felt that the dead don't exist at all and never have if someone does not remember them. Remembering on paper is the most enduring way of assuring that these people stay alive.

*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

Cisneros' short chapters seem unconnected like a stream-of-consciousness series of memories from a span in her childhood, fragmented, disordered, but nevertheless, related. A poignant memory concerning her father is a short chapter entitled, "For Papa Who Awakens Tired in the Nighttime." In this short piece her father wakes her one night and tells her, "Your abuelito is dead" (Cisneros 56). His own tears shake her as she contemplates the knowledge that everyone must die. She says if she could comfort him she would ". . . hold him and hold him and hold him" (Cisneros 57). The book can be opened to any page and still make sense. Only the first and last chapters seem to bookend the rest of the pieces. Some readers feel it is a jumble, but others recognize the charm of a memory that doesn't necessarily remember everything in order.

Cisneros treats everyday things with a childlike wonder. She spends one chapter describing how everyone in the family has different hair. Students often find this one amusing as many of them are obsessed with their own hair.

*When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago

Santiago sets up the reader nicely with her description of her family's living arrangements:

We children slept in hammocks strung across the room, tied to the beams in sturdy knots that were done and undone daily. A curtain separated our side of the room from the end where my parents slept in a four-poster bed veiled with mosquito netting. On the days he worked, Papi left the house before dawn and sometimes joked that he woke the roosters to sing the barrio awake. We wouldn't see him again until dusk, dragging down the dirt road, his wooden toolbox pulling on his arm, making his body list sideways. When he didn't work, he and Mami rustled behind the flowered curtain, creaked the springs under their mattress, their voices a murmur that I strained to hear but couldn't." (Santiago 11)

My most vivid memory from the book is Esmeralda's audition for Performing Arts High School and the meeting with one of the teachers many years later. For her audition Esmeralda was given a speech from Sidney Howard's drama *The Silver Cord*, a play much too sophisticated for someone her age with her basic command of English. The speech she performs is a bitter rant spoken by Christina to her mother-in-law. In this speech, Christina is telling off the mother-in-law she has just met, pointing out how she has stifled both of her sons. Esmeralda's recreation of her thick accent is particularly funny: She calls her "selfcent red self pee tee in" (self-centered, self-pitying) and says she has "on men shon ah ball pro klee bee tees" (unmentionable proclivities) (Santiago 264). When Esmeralda visits the school shortly before graduating from Harvard, one of her teachers tells her that they had to ask her to leave the room after the audition so they could laugh. At this point, Esmeralda wonders if she passed the audition because of her talent or simply because of her chutzpah.

In rereading the book I found that other sections had not stuck with me at all. There is one incident I was surprised that I hadn't remembered. When Esmeralda was still a young girl, she had to get dressed up and go to a funeral to perform the closing of the dead baby's eyes. Her mother promises the mother of the dead child that her daughter will do it, but Esmeralda is horrified at the thought of touching someone dead. The ceremony and prayers spooked her, and she reacted as though she had been physically violated. She took a cold shower, scrubbing herself all over: "But most of all, I scrubbed the two fingers that had touched the baby. No matter how much soap I put on them, they felt cold and oily, and I didn't know if I'd ever get the feeling of death off them" (Santiago 142). It seems odd to me that this graphic scene (which took about four pages to describe) escaped my memory while the vision of her audition remained fresh. Maybe it was because I know *The Silver Cord* well and have taught it. Of course, since memory is selective, I may have blotted out that unpleasant memory.

In keeping with the style of many narratives, Santiago describes her surroundings in great detail and list items as though she is asserting their existence. This is a motif I have noticed in more than one of the books. Both Beauvoir and Christie are also partial to describing rooms, gardens, and articles of dress so vividly the reader feels present. Providing detail is one of the hurdles a creative writing teacher faces. My students are

good at getting down the facts but are less proficient when it comes to descriptive writing.

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong

A window into San Francisco's Chinatown during the Depression and through WWII is opened by Wong in her autobiographical memoir about her life as the fifth daughter born to Chinese parents. Suitable for all ages, I first encountered this book when I was about twelve and remembered it clearly enough to search for a copy to use here.

Wong's daily experiences are told in third person with exquisite detail concerning her family's overalls factory, her upbringing in a traditional Chinese family, and her thoughts and feelings. The culture clashes Jade Snow experiences are mulled over and talked through in her mind and through her journal. Her inner journey to discover who she was and how she fit in with American society as well as in her traditional family is revealed through many small events. When little Jade Snow entered the American school, she was cautioned by her parents to respect her teachers as if they were her parents. She was delighted with school and the first of many accomplishments worth remembering was the day they all made butter.

After the cream had been churned for some time, sure enough, yellow flecks appeared, and then joined and thickened into a lump of butter! Jade Snow experienced a wonderful new feeling—the pride of personal creation. And when she smeared her own butter made with her own hands on the crackers . . . (Wong 13)

At home, Jade Snow knew her place and it was that of a daughter in a Chinese household, less than either of her brothers, never hugged, never praised. When she was hurt in the schoolyard, a teacher hugged her and comforted her. This brought pleasure and confusion to the child. She was afraid to tell her parents for fear of criticism. She felt conflicted in many school situations. When she was called in by her teacher for passing a note, she challenged him and demanded that those who started the note, all those who passed it, and the intended recipient also be questioned. She cited her father, saying he told her to always tell the truth. When faced with this, the teacher backed down, not wanting to face Mr. Wong who was also the director of the school board.

Another time she was harassed by a white boy who yelled out, "Chinky, chinky, Chinaman!" and was disappointed by her refusal to be ruffled. She tries to understand why this boy would behave in this way:

. . . she would never have thought of running after one of them (foreigners) and screaming with pointed finger, for instance, "Hair on your chest!" After all, people were just born with certain characteristics, and it behooved no one to point a finger at anyone else, for everybody was or had something which he could not help. (Wong 68)

While attending the American school, rushing home to eat quickly, and then rush off to Chinese school, Jade Snow still had to do household chores and keep up with her homework. The amount of work did not bother her but another problem would not go

away; she wanted to be recognized as an individual. This theme recurs throughout the book. Chinese parents did not praise their children, and their children did not expect it or thank their parents if they said something that could be construed as a compliment. When American culture clashed with her parents' expectations, Jade Snow was reminded that American ways could not replace the thousands of years of Chinese culture and who was she to question it?

The second year of college was very likely the impetus for Jade Snow's literary career, for she took an English class that used memoir writing as a basis for studying writing. For once, Jade Snow was encouraged to think about herself and talk about herself. This was a very liberating experience for her: "She learned that good writing should improve upon the kind of factual reporting she had done in her diaries; it should be created in a spirit of artistry" (Wong 132).

She realizes that beyond herself and her world she was becoming aware of the world around her. She compared her college writings to the journals she'd kept in high school and noticed the change in her perceptions. This is reminiscent of both Woolf and Christie. At her graduation from junior college, she was chosen to be Salutatorian and was shocked as well as pleased that her father planned a luncheon at a special restaurant to which he invited Jade Snow's professors. She had finally done something that no other Chinese daughter had done: "Mama and Daddy had granted her a measure of recognition and acceptance. . . they were at last tolerant of her effort to search for her own pattern of life" (Wong 136).

Significant occurrences in her later college years included her surprise at being accepted as an individual among her peers and her chagrin at dealing with professors who wanted her to think rather than simply record facts and memorize them.

Her ultimate success was in opening a pottery shop in Chinatown in which she threw pots in the front window and made such a success in a short time that she was able to buy a car. Finally, her father stood up in front of company and shook her hand as an equal.

### *The Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster

Auster's examination of life was triggered by his father's passing. As he interacts with his young son he tries to link the generations and construct some meaning to life. On memory Auster says that it's not so much about the story in remembering a story that someone told you, it's the remembering itself: "For the story would not have occurred to him unless whatever summoned its memory had not already been making itself felt" (Auster 77). So the act of remembering is also an act of new creation. He defines it thus: "Memory: the space in which a thing happens for the second time" (Auster 81).

Auster also agonizes about the disappearance of a person after his death. He quotes from Israel Lichtenstein's last testament in which the man was sure his death would come soon in the Warsaw Ghetto and he wanted to commit his memories of his wife, Gele Seckstein, and their daughter, Margalit. His success is that Auster has read of them and brought them alive again. All of Auster's readers have heard their names, and now, so have you.

Auster writes of a visit to Amsterdam where he visited Anne Frank's room in the Annex. He tells of wandering the streets, lost, getting farther and farther from where he intended to go, but he philosophizes about this saying that there may be a purpose in his being lost. He even felt exhilarated and liberated by being lost. When one is in an

unfamiliar place, the only thing one has is himself. And so Auster delves more deeply into himself.

Later on he visits an elderly woman and is shown a portrait of her as a child. To his surprise he recognized that it is the same person and comes to the conclusion that we are all the same people we have always been. This is reminiscent of Christie's memories of herself as a little girl with sausage curls. It also brings to mind a short story in which the little girl says she is not just ten on her tenth birthday; she is also nine, and eight, and etc.

One of the themes Auster explores is that of reading and the oral tradition. He tells about reading aloud to his son. He writes extensively about Collodi and the Pinocchio story, touching on the theory and meaning of fairy tales, concluding that the child must know about the imaginary in order to understand the reality.

This book can be especially helpful in teaching creative writing because Auster is also a novelist and his style, at least in *Brooklyn Follies*, follows similar thought patterns to *The Invention of Solitude*.

#### *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt

If nothing else, read your students the story about the baloney sandwich in the first chapter of this book. McCourt's ability to treat potentially volatile situations with fond humor makes this book a fun read. Besides that, at the moment when you, the teacher, are wondering about the outcome of any given situation or reflecting on how the current crisis he's describing will turn out, McCourt interrupts himself with the answer to that very question. After a child throws a bag lunch and McCourt says, "Stop throwing sandwiches," he writes what we are all thinking:

Professors of Education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don't mind, the child's felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom (McCourt 16).

If you're not amused by this point in the book, you just don't get it. The book is chock full of tongue-in-cheek anecdotes, bittersweet stories about McCourt's personal life, and some really good teaching tips. In keeping with the tone of his other books, McCourt makes no apologies for his actions; he lays it all out there and you can take it or leave it, thank you very much.

#### *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi

Jarred by the political turmoil in her country and deeply troubled by the way women were forced to live their lives in Tehran, Nafisi took a chance and invited several of her female students to her home to read Western literature in a sort of book club/seminar setting. Along with Nabokov's *Lolita*, the group read *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Madame Bovary*, among others. Reading and discussing these works led to a lot of self-examination among the women. At the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the students observes the following: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a

Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife” (Nafisi 257).

In spite of the time period and cultural differences, these women could make comparisons and contrasts to their own lives. Through examination of Western literature, Nafisi’s students were free to discuss subjects forbidden in their university classrooms. Beyond the reading, Nafisi encouraged the students to keep journals which she reviewed. At one point, students were defining themselves.

Manna saw herself as fog, moving over concrete objects, taking on their form but never becoming concrete herself. Yassi described herself as a figment. Nassrin, in one response, gave me the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of *paradox*. (Nafisi 75)

In her own reflections, Nafisi noted that the women wrote about themselves in the context of the world rather than from within. Throughout the book, Nafisi steps back to examine her world and her reactions to it. After living in the United States for awhile, she had a flood of memories from Iran which she shared with her children who referred to “them” and to things “over there.” Even while she was dredging up both happy and sad memories, Nafisi found herself wondering what had triggered these memories. Constant analysis is Nafisi’s way of dealing with the parts of the world she has trouble understanding.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.” –Anne Frank

### **Classroom Activities**

#### **Day One—Prereading Activities**

On the first day of class I will answer the usual questions about homework and grading for the semester and then quickly switch to telling them a story about my childhood. I don’t want to put an example here because the story may change depending on the class. Sometimes a morning class will be more ready for a particular story than an afternoon class. Anyway, each teacher should have his or her own childhood stories to tell. I will probably pick something funny that shows that I can laugh at myself. After I finish the story, I will ask who was reminded of something from their childhood. I expect to be bombarded with offers to tell their stories. This can become quite competitive, but it is vital to note which students do not raise their hands and do not wish to share anything personal. It is important before the children start sharing their personal anecdotes to stress that no one is being asked to say anything they don’t want to say. It’s fine if some students just listen. Since this is a writing class and not an acting class, their grades will not be affected by this.

**Day Two—**The class will begin by my asking how the students felt about the first class yesterday. Did they think it was fun? Stupid? Boring? Their answers should lead to more discussion. When we have exhausted everyone’s take on the first class, students will be introduced to the concept of memoir writing through teacher lecture and handouts defining and describing what memoir is and how and why people enjoy both reading and writing about their own lives and those of others. Through memoir, writers decide what their readers will experience of their lives and how much. Then students will consider how memoir writing can be useful to the creative writer. Students will receive a handout

(see **Appendix A**) and a bibliography list they can consult (choose from mine or make your own).

**Day Three**—Students will analyze several samples (excerpts) of memoir provided by the teacher. These will include Cisneros’ “For Papa Who Awakes Tired in the Dark,” the first page of Equiano’s narrative, and the Madame Schacter chapter of *Night*. (These can be adapted to your individual classroom needs and I am not including them here because of copyright legalities.)

**Day Four**— Today the class will write as a group. Students will construct a memoir with the teacher on the board or overhead. See **Appendix A** for my setup.

**Day Five**—Students will begin with an early memory. See **Appendix B**.

**Day Six**—Volunteers will share stories with the class for comment and discussion. For this first sharing I will allow students who want to read and will not urge those not yet confident in their writing to share with the whole class.

**Day Seven**— Students will write a “trouble story” about themselves. See **Appendix C**.

**Day Eight**— Now that they have warmed up with writing a couple of situations, students will complete a character checklist. See **Appendix D**.

**Day Nine**—Now it’s time for the students to look at their personal memoirs and lift sections to use for their characters. They can work alone or in pairs to decide what parts of their own lives they will assign to their character(s).

**Day Ten**— Students will start incorporating the personal material into their characters’ lives by writing a story about their character using parts of one or both personal memoirs.

**Day Eleven**—Now that they’ve gotten to know their characters better, students will backtrack and write a birth announcement for their characters. See **Appendix E**.

**Day Twelve**—Students will create an outline of a short story in which their character is planning a journey. Today they will write about the preparations, using an early memory. See **Appendix F**.

**Day Thirteen**—The next chapter will be about the traveling. In this section, students will have their characters recall a trouble incident in which they will try to include material from their own personal trouble stories. See **Appendix G**.

**Day Fourteen**—Part three of the journey story will tell what happens when the character arrives at his/her destination.

**Day Fifteen**—The final stage of the journey story will be reflection by the character on what happened during the trip back home.

**Day Sixteen**—Students will choose peer editors and review and comment on each others’ work. See **Appendix H**.

**Day Seventeen**—Students will be given time in class for revision and consultation with their peer editors.

**Day Eighteen**—Students will go to the computer lab for typing and setting up their stories to be bound into books.

**Day Nineteen**—The teacher will provide covers for the books and students can assemble them for binding.

**Day Twenty**—The books will be displayed in the classroom and students will be able to look at their classmates’ books.

### **Annotated Bibliography/Sources**

#### **Teacher Reading List**

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Bantam, 1983.

- Angelou's poignant recollections of the many harsh times in her life show her indomitable spirit in her constant pursuit to overcome these memories.
- Auster, Paul. *The Invention of Solitude*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1982.  
Auster's book is now in its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary printing. His introspection into the discovery of himself is told through his memories and observations concerning his father and his son.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Cleveland, Chicago: The World Publishing Company, 1959  
Beginning with her picturesque childhood, de Beauvoir gives the reader sharp pictures of her surroundings, the people in her life, and the dynamic personality she was developing even as a young child in this first of her five autobiographical books. This reminded me very much of Agatha Christie's book.
- Bomer, Katherine. *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005.  
Bomer's book is a primer on how to teach writing, particularly memoir writing, to children and teenagers.
- Christie, Agatha. *Agatha Christie: an Autobiography*. New York: Penguin, 1991.  
Christie's story is a perennial favorite of mine. She offers glimpses into late Victorian life through WWII and recounts her life in a compelling yet conversational style that is uplifting and informative.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Knopf, 1984.  
Now included in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum, Cisneros' reflections on her childhood are tiny snapshots of childlike observations.
- Delany, Sarah L., Delaney, A. Elizabeth, and Hill Hearsh, Amy. *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. New York: Dell, 1993.  
Written with a great deal of humor and reverence, both Sadie and Bessie Delaney deliver the goods on what life was like growing up before and during the Civil Rights Movement.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, in the Mcdougell/Littell *The Language of Literature*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.  
Kidnapped and sold to be transported to Barbados as a slave, eleven-year-old Equiano presents an articulate memory of his voyage and sale.
- Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.  
This timeless classic has spoken to generations of young people and tells about Anne's young teenage years in a totally candid way. If nothing else inspires students to write, this should.
- Kaufman, Bel. *Up the Down Staircase*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.  
A first-year teacher records her ups and downs as a naïve young woman tackling her first teaching job in a tough urban school.
- Keller, Helen. *The Story of My Life*. New York: Signet, 2002.  
Helen Keller's profound revelations about life are astute yet simple thoughts about life, relationships, memory, and language. Her work is utterly charming and irresistible.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage, 1977.

- Kingston's story is told in what the Chinese call "talk-story." In the different sections of the book she alternates between the tales told by her mother and her real-life experiences as a Chinese American growing up in Western culture while still working at the family laundry.
- McCourt, Frank. *Teacher Man: A Memoir*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.  
The author of *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* once again treats his readers with his autobiographical musings, this time as a teacher in 1950s Brooklyn. His insights are dead on and he displays the grace and maturity to laugh at himself. All around, a good read.
- Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003.  
Foreign to many of us Western readers, Nafisi takes her readers into a world of politics that is difficult for us to understand and shows that people (women, in this case) are the same around the world, inviting us to rejoice with her in the power of women and positive thought.
- Paul, Miss Susan. *Memoir of James Jackson, Aged 6 Years and 11 Months*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.  
Carefully recorded and preserved by his teacher, the accomplishments of young James Jackson are brought to life in this account of a little boy's craving for education and holiness.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam, 1983.  
Rodriguez shares his sadness at losing his understanding of Spanish while acquiring English. His struggle to come to terms with needing to relearn his first language are depicted with grace and sorrow.
- Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.  
Nicknamed Negi because she was the darkest of the children, Esmeralda Santiago describes her family's struggles to escape poverty and her determination to get a good education once they arrived in America. Both funny and poignant, Santiago's book is an informative and entertaining read.
- Taulbert, Clifton L. *When We Were Colored*. New York: Penguin, 1995.  
Taulbert makes liberal use of his boyhood memories and the vivid characters in his life in this memoir of growing up as a "little black boy" in the early twentieth century. His style is easy and conversational and the stories he recounts make the reader want more.
- Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.  
This is a real eye-opener. Told in a dispassionate voice, Walls tells about the neglect she and her siblings suffered throughout their childhood until each one reached an age where escape was possible. Her guilt over her success while watching her parents continue to decline makes the book all the richer.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Bantam, 1982.  
Wiesel's stark reporting of his ordeal as a teenager in Nazi concentration camps switches from one dark mood to another. Sometimes in despair, sometimes saddened by the haunting melodies of a violinist who died in the night, Wiesel is relentless in his ruthless persistence to drive the ugly truth down the throats of his readers.

Wong, Jade Snow. *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 1989.

Wong chronicles the life of a schoolgirl who is daughter number five in a Chinese family. She has many rules and traditions to follow that cramp her style in 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976.

This compilation of previously unpublished memoir-writing reveals the Virginia Woolf in fragments of typewritten, hand-corrected manuscript which she had never revised. Often, the text leaves off or there is a correction of a date or name by the editor. This is a candid look at an author.

### **Student Reading List**

If the unit is taught to ninth grade students, they will read *The House on Mango Street*, and *Night* in their regular English classes. In the tenth and twelfth grades, they will read excerpts from *Night*, and eleventh graders will read an abridged version of Olaudah Equiano's memoir. Any other readings will be short excerpts or paragraphs from the books in the teacher bibliography.

### **Appendices**

#### **Appendix A (Student Handout)**

Creative Writing Introduction

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Memoir* is defined as:

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality OR

What people write about their own memories of their own lives.

In the next few days, we will talk about the elements of memoir writing and try to discover the reasons why people write them. Writing about your own life can give you realistic material for using when you create a fictional character.

Think about these things:

Why do people write memoirs? List as many reasons as you can think of.

---

(Add more lines as necessary to fill up your page.)

Here is a sample of a 5-minute memoir. Yours will be a 15-minute memoir.

I began to believe in magic. It happened when I was six. I suppose I must have recently seen *Peter Pan*. I know that we went to see it on stage. Anyway, Tinkerbell was there and she was telling me things, only she wasn't talking. We were underwater and there was a treasure chest and whatever she was telling me was really important. I was sorry I couldn't really understand what she was saying. We traveled underwater for a long time and lots of other characters from the story were there, but Tinkerbell was the only important one. Then I realized that I couldn't understand her because the sound was all messed up. There was a pounding in my ears. Also, the water was sparkling, like there were lightning bugs in it.

I felt that I was part of a conspiracy—just me and Tinkerbelle. I decided that I was special; I knew something other people didn't know. It's just that the sound and the sparkling were kind of confusing.

Later, when I was getting over the pneumonia, I tried to tell my parents about the magic I had experienced, but they thought it was just a dream brought on by the high

fever. It wasn't until much later that I learned about hallucinating. See, I knew I hadn't been asleep when I saw Tinkerbelle.

Why do people need drugs when they have imaginations? I can imagine anything I want and sometimes I imagine things I don't want. It's all magic, though, and I'm glad I found it. I'm never bored because I have my imagination as a refuge. It's a place I can always go.

### **Appendix B**

Creative Writing  
Assignment #1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Write about your earliest memory. You may write in first person as your character or you may write in third person. Be as descriptive as possible, paying attention to detail. Here is a BRIEF example (yours should be longer).

I remember learning to stand up by putting my hands on the seat of the kitchen chair at my aunt's house. Her kitchen was bright and it was a happy place to be. I was with my cousin Rosanne (who is five weeks younger than I am and never lets me forget it) and we were both practicing standing up. I know I could let go of the chair seat but I couldn't walk anywhere away from the chair yet. Anyway, my father and my uncle were standing in the doorway of the kitchen and my cousin kept getting their names mixed up. They would ask her to point to Uncle Mike and she would point to my father. Then she was asked to point to Uncle Frank and she'd point to Uncle Mike. Everyone laughed except me. Then they would try to correct her and say the right name while pointing to the right uncle. But I thought she was stupid because Uncle Mike was Uncle Mike and the other one was Daddy. I couldn't figure out why she couldn't get that right, but after all, we weren't even two years old yet.

### **Appendix C**

Creative Writing  
Assignment #2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

At our last meeting I asked you to think about a situation in which you were in trouble. Even good people occasionally get into trouble. Maybe someone else caused the problem for you or maybe your character created his/her own problem. I would like to see some prewriting today or even the beginning of a first draft if you didn't begin this assignment yesterday. One way to write this would be as a diary entry. You may choose another format if you wish. Consider the following elements:

(Teachers: space out the items below and add lines where necessary.)

What kind of trouble? Whose fault was it? What are the possibilities for resolving the problem? Who else is involved? What did you learn from this experience?

### **Appendix D**

Creative Writing  
Assignment #3

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Today we will begin our character development. What are the elements you must consider when creating a character? Continue writing on the back or use another sheet of paper if necessary. You may leave some of these lines blank or may add other information if there is no line provided for something else you wish to add.

(Teachers: space out the items below and add lines where necessary.)

Character's name \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ethnic/racial background \_\_\_\_\_  
 Locale \_\_\_\_\_  
 Job/school/unemployed/retired \_\_\_\_\_  
 Religious beliefs \_\_\_\_\_  
 Family members \_\_\_\_\_  
 Romantic interest \_\_\_\_\_  
 Friends \_\_\_\_\_  
 Pets \_\_\_\_\_  
 Food preferences \_\_\_\_\_  
 Allergies/health problems \_\_\_\_\_  
 Arrests \_\_\_\_\_  
 Travel \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hobbies \_\_\_\_\_  
 Outstanding accomplishments \_\_\_\_\_  
 Community service/charity work \_\_\_\_\_  
 Important events in his/her past \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E**

Creative Writing Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Assignment #4

Now that you've created a character, let's start at the beginning with a birth announcement. Below see an example of my announcement.

**I It's a Boy! I**

Name \_\_\_\_\_Mercury Smith\_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_October 13, 2010\_\_\_\_\_

Weight \_8 lbs. 9 oz.\_ Length \_\_\_21"\_\_

Proud parents \_Marsha York Smith \_Dr. Jeremiah Smith\_\_

Please join us for a celebration of our first-born son at the Smith residence on October 31, 2010 where you can meet Merc up close and personal. Hope to see you there!

Mars, Jer, and big sis Tee

**Appendix F**

Creative Writing Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Assignment #5 --*The Journey*

Today you will start planning a story in which your character takes a journey. Your destination can be anywhere. Some suggestions are: to visit a graveyard of an ancestor, to attend a family reunion, to visit a college for a tour or interview, to meet your birth mother, to visit a relative in a nursing home or in jail. Think about how your character feels before embarking on the trip. You may write in first person or third person. The beginning of your story might be the thoughts that are running through your character's head as he/she packs and gets ready to leave. Think of today's writing as the first chapter. Don't go any farther than actually leaving for the trip.

**Appendix G**

Creative Writing Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Assignment #6

It's time to write the next part of *The Journey*. You should have the preparations and thoughts about the trip done (#5) so now you can continue with the actual departure. During this part of the story, your characters can think about what they will do when they have reached their destinations or perhaps something interesting happens on the trip or they meet someone interesting. Start today and be ready to share your progress tomorrow.

**Standards** Pennsylvania Content Standards for Communications: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify the purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.
9. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations.