



Living History:

Memoir Writers Teach Across Time By Gail Hall Howard

On a Saturday morning early in September, I walked into a muggy classroom filling up with would-be writers. Soon I would discover that English 223: Memoir Writing, at Connecticut's Norwalk Community College, had attracted people with amazing stories to tell. One met her husband of 50 years, a Holocaust survivor, on a blind date; one survived the firebombing of Stuttgart and later converted to Judaism; one fled Czechoslovakia with his aristocrat mother and what furs and jewels they could carry. Others had lived less history-laden dramas, coping with a schizophrenic sister, a beloved alcoholic wife, a cruel or drug-addicted or dying parent.

Students who write about experiences that stigmatized or isolated them—or in one case, nearly ended a life—often achieve a surprising catharsis in the classroom. In a carefully planned and managed memoir class, the act of reading one's writing aloud to a sympathetic audience offers writers a measure of control over the memory of events that once controlled them. They also grow quickly in the craft, energized

by the challenge of getting a story across that has waited months, years, or decades to be told. Instead of cringing at the possibility of making a mistake, or resisting what they consider an irrelevant assignment, students struggle to get it all down as the weeks fly by.

The Fall 2003 semester was indeed over too fast. All 12 students, ranging in age from mid-thirties to upper seventies, had achieved a new understanding of what constitutes good writing, and they developed considerably—in some cases, dramatically—in confidence and skill. The stories that writers needed to tell had at least been well launched. We had gasped in astonishment, waited in silence while writers held tears, and laughed at how human foibles emerge in even the toughest tale. One writer told of the hard-edged Italian grandmother who sheltered her from a drug-torn home. Every Friday the two watched the same sitcoms with a TV tray between them, sharing six pieces of candy lined up next to Nana's soaking teeth.

The work of writing their stories changed the way these

students understood the past, and the desire to make their stories stronger taught them to appreciate such abstractions as development and organization. They learned in ways I'd seen other students learn in my 15 years of teaching memoir writing. But this year I discovered something new: Memoir writers were not only eager learners but also potentially powerful teachers.

The class was behind me, but I couldn't stop thinking about the World War II stories and their significance. I described the class to the editor of *MultiCultural Review*, Lyn

in early March to which four language arts classes would be invited—an "in-house field trip." Students would be asked to write a follow-up paper about what it was like to hear first-hand accounts of major twentieth-century conflicts.

On the day of the reading, entitled "Memoir as Witness," nearly 100 students—more than Bobbie had expected, necessitating a last-minute scramble for chairs—made their way into the library. Bobbie introduced the event, suggesting that all but a few questions be held to the end. Derwin Gonzalez, a student from Bobbie's workshop, introduced speakers.

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Miller-Lachmann, and she asked if I had tried bringing the readers to a high school audience. I immediately called my friend and colleague Barbara (Bobbie) Loss at Fairfield High School and asked if she would want readers for her Spring 2004 Multi-Heritage Workshop class. She agreed enthusiastically. I invited two memoir writers with history in their stories. Helen Wallerstein agreed and asked if her husband, Jules, not a class member, could participate. Our good fortune! Ilse Zimmerman, Helen's friend and fellow classmate, also agreed to read. I signed on to read from my memoir about marrying across the color line in 1968 Chicago.

Bobbie and I worked out a plan via e-mail. Our memoirists would read from their work in the library in a double period

First, Jules Wallerstein read his account of passage on the *St. Louis*, a ship filled with Jews fleeing Hitler in 1939 that was turned away from Cuba, the United States, and other countries. As they returned to Europe, where two-thirds of the 900 passengers would be killed, Jules listened as the adults debated a possible group suicide. He was 12.

As we teachers like to say, you could hear a pin drop.

Next, Helen Wallerstein read about a happy childhood in the Bronx, where children played all afternoon until mothers called them in from tenement windows. Her world of street games and comic books developed a dark side as rationing began and Helen's mother prepared food and clothing for relatives who later perished in the camps.

Ilse Zimmerman read of her father's refusal to join the Nazi party, telling neighbors, "My wife won't let me—too much drinking." He soon lost his business, and they hid in their home. When Allied firebombing of Stuttgart began, Ilse was 17. As she helped her parents douse flaming walls with wet brooms, burning wood beams raced sideways past her window.

I read of being bullied by Chicago police while a society that knew nothing about the daily humiliations of Blacks,



Community members and high school students share experiences across generations and cultures.



Fairfield High School student Sherien Moussa displays mementos of her childhood in Egypt.

a society that only recently had included me, failed to see. I was joined by a Fairfield High School teacher, Nilda Irizarry, who wrote of growing up as the darker sister in a Puerto Rican home, of the coldness of her father's family toward her and her mother.

Students listened, motionless and intent, through all the presentations. Where did the time go? The bell rang just as the final question and answer period should have begun.

A week later, I received an e-mail from Jennie Brown, another student in Bobbie's workshop. She wanted all memoir readers to come back for a reading to a larger audience and an open discussion, so students could hear "from your mind, as well as from the written memoir."

I spoke with Bobbie, and she too conveyed the students' enthusiasm for a return visit. As she spoke, I learned more about her Multi-Heritage Workshop (MHW). Originally, she had designed the course to enrich an already successful remedial reading program, but it now served students of all reading levels. Designed to explore individual identity in the context of larger social issues, MHW often attracts students who perceive themselves to be outsiders. Students examine events that have shaped the experience of different groups within American society. They study a series of paired films and readings, including memoir, fiction, and biography. In addition, each student prepares a multimedia "Identity Album," including a personal/historical time line, a photo essay, a response to a work of art, a poem or other creative piece, a research unit that uncovers reasons why the student or ancestors came to this country, and a statement about personal growth and hopes for the future. The course, an elective, had run for ten years, an achievement Bobbie considers central to her 34-year career at Fairfield High School.

She described what had gone on in her classroom since the first presentation:

Earlier in the semester, students had explored such events as the Holocaust, the civil rights movement, and the struggles of Latin American immigrants as part of a curriculum that pairs readings and film to increase interest in cultural and historical events. Now they had heard real stories by people who experienced what they were reading about, and the memoirs had spurred their curiosity. In class, for instance, they wanted to know more about the tragedy of the *St. Louis*. "How could countries turn away innocent victims?" they wondered.

"Memoir as Witness" had become a focal point of class action and class discussion. Henry Hamilton's *Eyes on the Prize*, the documentary film they had seen earlier in the semester, was now living history. Confronted with the question, "Would



Fairfield High School student Sara Haile-Mariam talks to fellow students about immigrating to the U.S. from Ethiopia.

being a biracial couple in Chicago be different in 2004 than it was in 1968?" the class debated attitudes about interracial relationships today and whether they and their own peers are still racist.

We happily returned to Fairfield High School in April as part of the school's International Day, and "Memoir as Witness" began with two simultaneous readings. The World War II readers took over the library, while the racism readers spoke to a full house in a 120-seat auditorium upstairs. Once again our panel had expanded, this time to include student Sara Haile-Mariam, born in Ethiopia. She read of helping a friend baby-sit and choosing roles for make-believe with a four-year-old girl who snickered, "You're the witch because you're black." Sara spoke of her fear that Blacks would never make "the cut to be the hero," but also of her determination to love America anyway because "despite...the lack of understanding...we are able to express ourselves in any way, shape, or form." Her lively, skillfully rhymed poem, "Brown Skin," called for an end to "guessing" who someone is with a single look:

I love my brown skin and the way it fits me
I even love the way evil eyes hit me
Because I'm brown skinned and intelligent what's
there to say?
I've jumped into life's game, and I've chosen to play.

Her poem goes on to exhort young people to refuse "stereo-hype," asking if the people who gave their lives for civil rights had died in vain. Her fellow students' vigorous applause put a small dent in the insider/outsider divide that exists at Fairfield High School and every school in America.

Next, Nilda Irizarry read again her bittersweet story of growing up where the global issue of skin color played out on the intimate family stage. Nilda's sister, older, lighter, blonde, stood by her when the family matriarch refused Nilda eye contact, even failing to give her a Christmas gift, commenting, "Aye! We forgot Negra." Despite these cruelties, an unshakable bond sustained the sisters in a family of strict rules, deeply felt religion, high aspirations, and a steadfast love that kept their material poverty in the background.

After the readings, we reassembled in the library. Thanks to Jennie Brown, seven tables surrounded by chairs had been set up, each displaying a placard with a memoirist's name. Another presenter had stepped forward: Sherien Moussa, a student born in Egypt, sat at one of the tables, displaying mementos of her country, ready to talk of her experiences in two worlds.

At my table, students asked how long I had been married to my Black ex-husband and why we had broken up. I gave short answers, students seemed satisfied, and we moved on quickly to the larger issues. They began to talk of being different despite the mask of whiteness: class differences, language differences, and being overweight emerged as reasons to be shunned. One student asked if you could think of yourself as white without putting anyone down. I said that in Chicago when I grew up, "white" meant no matter what kind of loser you were, no matter what happened to your family, at least you weren't "colored." I asked the group if they thought that the meaning had changed. The one dark-skinned student in the group sat at the periphery, giggling and talking to a friend, in retreat from a topic too difficult to address. I left the door open for him to join us.

After 15 minutes, MHW student monitors invited audiences to switch tables and ask questions of a different memoirist. Students played musical chairs at 15-minute intervals three times before the bell rang.

At a luncheon organized by MHW students, memoirists rejoiced over an amazing success. Ilse Zimmerman was grateful for students' "close attention and good and thoughtful questions." She recalled a key student comment: "It is so much better to hear living history, instead of getting it from books." Jules Wallerstein hoped he'd left a "lasting impression on a young audience." Helen "felt honored by a chance to be exposed to children in these impressionable years," and was glad to add to Jules's story with "something of the home front."

Approximately 400 students participated in the event, nearly a quarter of the more than 1,700 students enrolled at Fairfield High School. This was by no means the first time the school had hosted outside speakers, nor the only time many students had studied war, race, or genocide. Were we just lucky to have a group of very interested activist students, or were there specific features of the memoir-writer/high-school-audience reading that left students eager for a chance to learn more?

Clearly the ground was fertile at Fairfield High School. International Day, an annual schoolwide event developed in the mid-eighties by teacher Colleen Kelly, featured multicultural programming. Students expected fresh perspectives on issues that resonated beyond their mostly middle-class suburban setting. Equally important, Bobbie Loss's leadership at the school was also long established. I could see that younger teachers were in the habit of participating when Bobbie promoted an event. But what else was at work? How did an audience of 100 in March become 400 in April, with a small class of mostly average students stepping confidently into leadership roles? Five reasons emerged from student comments and reaction papers:

1. A live presentation by individuals who have experienced history is an eye opener for any audience, but particularly for students who, despite the best teaching, learn history secondhand. As one student commented in his reaction paper:

Witnessing several individuals' encounters with history is a rare kind of education that cannot be received in a standard school setting.

Another student wrote to Jules Wallerstein:

The tone you used when you were sharing it with us made it seem like it had just happened, and I'm sure when you tell the story in your mind's eye you're taken back to those exact moments. Thank you, sir, very much. You've given me a very deep respect for survivors.

Another student's paper revealed:

As I was listening to these memoirs, it really hit me that these stories that made me so sad and frightened were actually stories of real people.

2. When high school students listen to adults recount childhood or youthful experiences, it's as if teenagers are talking to their peers across the divide of time. Students imagine themselves in the memoirists' shoes. An ESL student from Turkey wrote:

I was shocked about the bad experiences they had in their life. I was wondering how did they handle that. I guess I would not handle it.

Another student wrote:

What's [it] like to worry about whether you will live or not at 12 years old?

A third student wondered:

Could any of their stories recur and become my own story? Probably not, which is very fortunate. When going through their tough times, they had dreamed of the world I live in while we, in our world, are wishing for something better....We should be grateful for what we do have.

3. An individual's experience brings the overwhelming scale and scope of certain historical events down to a level to which students, or any audience, can connect. One student wrote to Jules Wallerstein:

I have always regarded the Holocaust as something out of a nightmare; a horrifying thing, but to an extent unbelievable. Hearing about your experience, from your own mouth and with the accent of your native country, made the tragedy seem more tangible....We all realize what courage it must take to muster up and share such touching and painful memories.

Another student wrote to Ilse Zimmerman:

It must have been very emotional to learn that everything you had been taught was a lie.

4. Memoirs undercut “issue fatigue.” Students tire of hearing of the struggle for equal rights or American freedoms, but can tune in to a presentation that conveys not “this is what you should respect,” but “this is what happened to me.” One student commented to me that her family often spoke of what had happened to the Jews: “It’s like, the Holocaust, the Holocaust, the Holocaust, but this presentation really let me see what people went through.” Another student wrote to Ilse Zimmerman about her school-fostered childhood admiration of Hitler:

I thought it was very noble and honest of you to confront your past....In the future, people need to realize the potential for mental control by the Government, and need to eliminate the problem as soon as possible....I can relate to you because I myself have experienced changing yourself and your personality and your wants out of fear and out of desire to be accepted by your companions.

Another student wrote:

I have never been racist, or disrespectful of other people. However, I never really knew how hard it could be to be part of one of these ethnic groups, since they are so often discriminated against.

5. A well-written memoir not only sheds light on history but also provides an example of good writing. Several students commented that they preferred Ms. Irizarry’s memoir because of the imaginative style in which it was written. Writing to her teacher, Sarah Halpert noted particularly “the ways in which you let your voice shine through and develop into something very distinctive.” Another student wrote to me asking an excellent question about the writer’s relationship to her subject:

Were there any restrictions mentally when you wrote this piece? Did you ever feel that you were compromising your feelings in order to keep it clean and polished?

* * *

“Memoir as Witness” had a powerful impact on students. Perhaps equally important, the example of adults coming forward to share memories of struggle was permission and protection for others to bring their stories to the table. Two students joined the panel. Others, such as the following Haitian-American student, commented on having their experience validated:

Listening to Ms. Irizarry was great....Like my culture...even within the same race, there is racism of who’s light, who’s darker, who’s better and who’s worse than the other.

Another wrote that he was relieved to hear that his family was not the only one to follow rules and customs that set them apart.

Clearly, “Memoir as Witness” was history that “hit it deep,” as one student put it. By bringing past events alive, memoirists formed a solid phalanx with teachers, those who must somehow convince the young that the past really happened—and to people like them. Students were grateful for what they learned, and the memoir writers were heartened by the openness of the students to learning history’s lessons. Finally, the collaboration between Bobbie and me made for better and faster planning and allowed Bobbie to know the memoirists’ values and viewpoints ahead of time.

Teaching Memoir

A memoir is a true story from the author’s past. But it is also the writer’s best attempt to work through the meaning of experience. Thus, a memoir is part story and part essay. As Irish memoirist Nuala O’Faolain says in *Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman*: “A memoir may always be retrospective, but the past is not where its action takes place” (52). Rather than a simple recounting of who, what, and when, a memoir involves remembering, searching for life’s turning points, sifting and sense-making; as FHS student Nick Miriello put it, “arduous tasks requiring an awesome amount of time.” I never tire of teaching memoir, because so much happens. I vary readings regularly, but over the years, I have settled on the following prescriptions:

- Start by setting high standards for the quality of writing, even when older students say that they only want “something for the grandchildren,” or when younger students say they can’t revise because “that’s exactly how it happened.”
- When students insist on only one version of the past, ask if siblings might disagree with their account of family events. Use this opportunity to discuss point of view, selection of detail, and, if feeling ambitious, the nature of truth itself.
- Ask students to read their work aloud. Model diplomacy and patience. Then encourage them to support each other with specific praise and constructive criticism.
- Allow readers exactly five seconds to apologize for the inadequacy of their writing.

One of the pleasures of working on “Memoir as Witness” was to discover that memoir writing was alive and well in the high school classroom. Nilda Irizarry comments:

Reading my memoir made students aware of my vulnerabilities. I revealed a piece of my identity, and from that moment forward, the teacher-student barrier seemed to fade. The students saw me as an emotional being with authentic feelings.

When students wrote their memoirs, they expressed the shades of their souls through words

without fear. Although many adults tend to ignore it, teenagers do have meaningful experiences that have shaped and influenced them. A ninth grade student opened up about the day her mother walked out on her and how she felt disappointed that her mother left behind only a note. The class was almost brought to tears. Sharing memoirs enables the English classroom to become a family.

Is it wise to teach a form of writing that takes things so close to the bone? Yes, as long as certain cautions are kept in mind. Teaching memoir is an exciting and sometimes exhausting assignment, one appropriate only for teachers with the skills and psychic energy to convey support and sympathy to individuals on short notice while carefully managing an entire class. Good management means addressing the issue of confidentiality early in the course.

First, it's important to clarify expectations about exposure. While no teacher in her right mind would force students to reveal more private information about themselves or their families than they wish to reveal, it takes some effort to insure that students don't assume that they are in fact under this sort of pressure. After hearing an adult student read a piece about a difficult marriage, another student said to me after class, "I get it—you have to spill your guts to get an A." At the next class, I explained that some students would reveal less than others and still get the same grade. It is the student's task to find a balance between two extremes: on the one hand, opening up too much too soon, and, on the other, offering nothing more than a dry "Who's Who" entry.

Students should understand and agree that what is said in class stays in class. But they should also know that class members might "accidentally" repeat what they have heard. I ask students to imagine how they would feel if their writing ended up as a human interest story in the local press or school newspaper. If that much exposure is too much, it is time to carefully consider how the memoir will be approached.

The question of confidentiality offers an opportunity to teach certain writing strategies. For instance, the right amount of revelation can all be in how a story is told. There is a big difference between saying, "I had just ended a relationship that I was better off without," and "I had just left a boyfriend who beat me up regularly."

I also offer students the option of handing in one assignment "for teacher's eyes only." Those who are considering teaching memoir should have a plan for meeting their obligation as "mandated reporters," as required by the laws of their state, to notify authorities if they suspect or know of abuse or neglect suffered by a child.

Finally, what students discover about themselves is as much an issue as what they share with others. One student in her thirties disappeared in the middle of a writing class I taught some years ago at the University of Massachusetts. She did not return my calls, but a year later walked into my office to thank me. Writing in my class made her realize that her marriage needed to end. She left school to get divorced and was now ready to continue her studies. I welcomed her back wholeheartedly, but there was a knot in my stomach. Clearly I

had helped her launch a process that I was unequipped to help her complete. She was fine, but I have carried a concern ever since about the power of writing and the limits of a writing teacher's role. Students should be encouraged to know, before they begin, who can provide help with the feelings or thoughts that may result from writing memoir: a school counselor, a therapist, or, at the least, a trusted friend.

In my years of teaching memoir to adults and younger college students, there have been no disasters, or at least none that I know of. I believe the benefits are worth the risk, that the work of owning one's personal history through writing strengthens a sense of self and motivates students, young or old, to be more interested in the history of everything else. Students who write about their experiences learn to write more quickly because they want to tell their stories well. Their success energizes them to take the next step toward becoming lifelong learners.

Setting the stage for the older generation to pass on their stories to the young hardly needs a justification. Nor do memoir projects that encourage good writing and self-realization. But neither of these teaching strategies happens often enough, and not often together. With more students encouraged to read memoir and in some cases to attempt their own, now is the time for high school and college teachers to seek out adult and especially elder memoirists and bring them into the classroom. Survivors of World War II and the Holocaust, plus many other writers whose lives are intertwined with twentieth-century struggles for freedom or equal rights, are ready and eager to pass on stories of youthful experience at history's turning points.

Resources

Holocaust Survivors Federation: World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust invites teachers to go to the web site, www.WFJCSH.org, to read stories written by survivors that are posted there. The site offers opportunities to do e-mail interviews of survivors. Teachers are welcome to e-mail the federation president at holocaustchild@comcast.net to ask for speakers in specific regional areas.

Memoir Courses: Community colleges, colleges, and universities offer courses in memoir writing taught by faculty who may be interested in bringing writers to schools. Contact the head of the English Department or search college web sites for course titles containing "memoir." Noncredit memoir writing classes are often available through adult education programs offered by local cities and towns or by continuing education programs at community colleges. Senior centers also offer memoir writing courses.

Recommended Memoir Writing Handbooks: Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*. Portland, Ore.: Eighth Mountain Press, 1997.

Roorbach, Bill. *Writing Life Stories*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, 1998.

Work Cited

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