

Reading/Writing Workshop Memoir

Dr. Beth Frye
Appalachian State University
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*"We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive
where we started / And know the place for the first time."* T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets*

*"It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a
straight line, most often spiraling."* Eudora Welty *One Writer's Beginnings* (p. 102)

The word *memoir* shares the same root as the words *memory* and *remember*. A memoir captures memories and comes from remembering. Unlike an autobiography, which describes in great detail the writer's life, memoirs usually focus on a particular time, like childhood, or a particular moment, like the first day of school. These writings not only reveal memories from the author's life, but they also reveal the author's thinking and feeling, reactions and emotions. Memoirs may validate our lives.

A memoir is a mere slice of ordinary life—a certain time period, a special relationship, a particular theme or angle on life written about the author of the piece. As Katherine Bomer shares, the contemporary memoir is, "A slice-of-life story. The memoirist takes a slice out of the pie of life and writes about it in a way that makes others care and want to read it...Memoir *interprets* experience...For young people, especially, then, the memoir acts as a record of what happened and a forecast of the future."

We write memoirs to remember, to construct meaning from our lives, so that others may witness what life was like for us because this makes us feel more "real." We write memoirs "to pass it on" and to record what must never be forgotten. We may write memoirs to better understand our lives or heal issues related to them.

The activities and information in the following sections are derived from Katherine Bomer's evocative book, *Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests*, 2005.

I. Inquiry: What is a memoir?

Begin this inquiry by asking students "What is a memoir?" Jot down students' initial responses. Come back to their responses after marinating them in memoirs!

II. Marinating students in Memoirs... Immerse students in as many picture book memoirs as possible! Also, read aloud book-length memoirs, excerpts, and poetry.

III. Memoir discussion and inquiry is continued as students investigate the genre. Come to consensus on a conceptual definition of memoir. Students should support their ideas with evidence from the books they have been reading. Genre possibilities or text structures for writing memoir are discussed:

- ❖ **Narrative/Picture Book**
 - Moment-in-Time (*Shortcut* by Donald Crews)
 - Series of Snapshots or Many-Moment Piece (*When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant and *Calling the Doves-El Canto de las Palomas* by Juan Felipe Herrera and Elly Simmons, *Family Pictures* by Pat Mora and Carmen Lomas Garza)
 - Focus on relationship(s) (*My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* by Patricia Polacco)
- ❖ **Photo/Picture Snapshots** (*Looking Back* by Lois Lowry and *Family Pictures-Cuadros de Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza)
- ❖ **Recurring Line** - *Before I Was Your Mother* by Katherine Lasky
- ❖ **Poetry** (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* by Naomi Shihab Nye and *Been to Yesterdays* by Lee Bennett Hopkins and *Deshawn Days* by Tony Medina)
- ❖ **Graphic Novel** (*To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel* by Siena Cherson Siegel and Mark Siegel)
- ❖ **Novels in Verse** (*Where I Live* by Eileen Spinelli and *Locomotion* by Jacqueline Woodson)
- ❖ **Letters**
- ❖ **Diary**
- ❖ **Songs**

❖ Photo Story (Written script)

Conceptualizing Memoir:

A memoir is a reflection on a memory; a memoir is retrospective, a look back in time. The writer tries to capture the "true essence" of the memory by *bringing meaning* to the memory. A memoir does not only recount an episode or a memory (like we often see in personal narrative), but also the memoir reveals the person. For example, a personal narrative may recount a first bike ride, or a trip to the beach. But for the memoirist, the purpose of the story is to reveal something enduring about oneself. As the writer, you are searching for the truth and significance of the story.

The External and Internal Journey of a Story- Lucy Calkins

- ❖ External Events move the story forward.
- ❖ Internal Responses create a journey of feelings.
- ❖ As the external events of the story move along, the main character will begin to feel, see, and think differently.

External Events create Internal Responses
Shortcut by Donald Crews

External Event	Internal Response

External Events create Internal Responses
"Mama Sewing" from *Childtimes* by Eloise Greenfield

External Event	Internal Response

IV. Stirring Memories: Getting Ready to Write

Memoirs

Acknowledge the significance of children's life topics!

Invoke memories by inviting students to:

- ❖ Tell stories about things that have happened in their lives. You may begin by telling an evocative story of your own.
- ❖ Create self-portraits and reflect on them. Think of a visual metaphor to describe you as a learner or person.
- ❖ Illustrate a powerful memory—paint, collage, pastels, crayons, etc.
- ❖ Respond in writing to a memoir (literary model) that the teacher reads aloud. Respond to the prompts:
 - What does this memoir remind you of from your own life?
 - What does this memoir make you feel? What from your own life informs that feeling?
 - Respond to this memoir by writing a story from your own life.

Other options:

- ❖ Read Aloud two or three short, evocative poems or snapshots. Ask students to jot down words or phrases that "ring true" with them or that "ring out like a bell."
- ❖ Next, look at the word or phrase and think of memories that connect to it. Ask students, "What does that word or phrase mean in your life?" This capitalizes on students' emotions.

Topics for Invoking Memoir Writing

- ❖ **Name Piece (See our lesson on NAMES)**
- ❖ Invite students to write down "**stand-out moments.**" Ask students, "What moments in your life do you remember as being important, or happy, or sad?"
- ❖ Think about some of these "**defining moments**" in life...some may include for students:
 - Birth of a sibling
 - Getting a pet
 - Family trip
 - Favorite transportation (bike, skateboard, car, etc.)
 - Learning how to do something
 - Discovering something you do well
 - Winning or losing a contest
 - Moving
 - Favorite Saying
 - Family Secret
 - Meeting a best friend
 - Falling in love or a first kiss
 - A special birthday, holiday, or vacation
 - Doing something that took a lot of courage
 - A major illness or accident
 - Being lost
 - Developing physically in adolescence
 - Divorce
 - Death of a loved one or pet
 - Trip you have taken
 - Special family tradition
- ❖ Think about **family stories that have been told about you.**
- ❖ Think about selected **people in your life, religion, ethnicity and culture.**
- ❖ Think about **places:** landscapes, neighborhood, block, certain houses, secret or private places.
- ❖ Think about **rooms** in your home (kitchen, den, dining room, bedroom) and memories these places evoke.
- ❖ Write about **candid photographs.**

- These guiding questions may help:
 - Describe the place where the photograph was taken.
 - Describe the other people in the photograph and their relation to you.
 - What happened right before this photograph was taken? After?
 - What surprises you about this picture, now that you really look at it?
 - Who is missing from this picture? Why?
 - What can't we see in the picture?
 - If that little person who is you in the picture could talk, what would he or she be saying?

- ❖ Write about **special objects** that you know you can write a lot about.
 - These guiding questions may help:
 - Describe the object precisely. What is it made of? What does it feel like? How is it the same or different from other objects like it?
 - Describe who gave this object to you and what your relationship was or is.
 - Tell the story of the moment you acquired this object.
 - What was your life like before you had the object?
 - How did your life change after getting this object?
 - What would happen if you ever lost this object or it was ruined?
 - What does this object say about you? I am the kind of person who...(loves anything chocolate; values homemade gifts; is athletic and loves adventure)
 - In other words, what does this object **mean to you!!!**

- ❖ List **memory-laden smells**: food, mom's perfume, mountain evergreens, dirt, ocean, fresh-cut grass.

- ❖ The key to writing successful memoirs is that students choose their own landmark moments to write about.

V. Choosing a Seed from Your Notebook

VI. Choosing a Mentor Book! Very Important!

VII. Drafting your memoir

Memoirs, Autobiographies, and First-Person Narratives in Children's Literature

Ballard, Robin. *Carnival*.

Brinckloe, Julie. *Fireflies*.

Byars, Betsy. *The Moon & I*.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*.

Collier, Bryan. *Uptown*.

Cooney, Barbara. *Hattie and the Wild Waves*.

Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*.

Crews, Donald. *Bigmama's*

Crews, Donald. *Shortcut*.

Dahl, Roald. *Boy*

Danziger, Paula. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*.

Danziger, Paula. *Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon*.

De Trevino, Elizabeth Barton. *I, Juan de Pareja*.

DiCamillo, Kate. *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

Ekoomiak, Normee. *Arctic Memories*.

**Ehrlich, Amy. *When I Was Your Age: Original Stories About
Growing Up- Volume One***

Forbes, Kathryn. *Mama's Bank Account*.

Fritz, Jean. *Homesick: My Own Story*.

Gantos, Jack. *Joey Pigza Loses Control*.

Gantos, Jack. *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*.

Gantos, Jack. *Hole in My Life*.

Garza, Carmen Lomas. *Family Pictures-Cuadros de Familia*.

Gray, Libba Moore. *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart*.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Childtimes*.

Harshman, Marc. *A Little Excitement*.

Hendershot, Judith. *In Coal Country*.

Hest, Amy. *Jamaica Louise James*.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Been to Yesterdays*.

Hort, Lenny. *How Many Stars in the Sky?*

Horvath, Polly. *Everything on a Waffle*.

Houston, Gloria. *My Great-Aunt Arizona*.

Krudop, Walter Lyon. *Blue Claws*.

Laminack, Lester. *Saturdays and Teacakes*

Lasky, Katherine. *Before I Was Your Mother*.

Lowry, Lois. *Looking Back*.

Lyon, George Ella. *Basket*.

MacLachlan, Patricia. *Baby*.

Mah, Adeline Yen. *Chinese Cinderella*.
Medina, Tony. *Deshawn Days*.
Mora, Pat. *Pablo's Tree*.
Myers, Walter Dean. *Bad Boy*.
Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle*.
Pinkney, Gloria Jean and Pinkney, Jerry. *Back Home*.
Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*.
Polacco, Patricia. *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother..*
Polacco, Patricia. *Some Birthday*.
Pomerantz, Charlotte. *The Chalk Doll*.
Rosen, Michael. *Home*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *But I'll Be Back Again*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *Best Wishes*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *Waiting to Waltz*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *When I Was Young in the Mountains*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *When the Relatives Came*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *Christmas in the Country*.
Rylant, Cynthia. *Missing May*.
Say, Allen. *Grandfather's Journey*.
Shannon, George. *Climbing Kansas Mountains*.
Siegel, Siena Cherson. *To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel*.
Sis, Peter. *The Wall: Growing up behind the Iron Curtain*.
Smucker, Anna Egan. *No Star Nights*.
Soto, Gary. *Too Many Tamlales*.
Spinelli, Eileen. *Where I Live*.
Spinelli, Jerry. *Crash*.
Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*.
Steig, William. *When Everybody Wore A Hat*.
Tillage, Leon and Roth, Susan. *Leon's Story*.
Viorst, Judith. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good,
Very Bad Day*.
Woodson, Jacqueline. *Locomotion*.
Yep, Laurence. *The Star Fisher*.
Yep, Laurence. *The Lost Garden*.
Yolen, Jane. *Grandad Bill's Song*.
Yolen, Jane. *Letting Swift River Go*.
Yolen, Jane. *Owl Moon*.