

Contemporary Memoir: A 21st-Century Genre Ideal for Teens

The authors describe an emerging subgenre of literary nonfiction and suggest ways to help students write their own mini-memoirs.

For the past 20 years, we have been reading and teaching literary memoir to students of all ages. In the mid-1980s, we began looking for ways to incorporate more nonfiction into our literature classes, hoping to find a fresh genre unflattened by instruction. We wanted to explore with students a genre that literary critics had not already overanalyzed and for which they had not created formulaic heuristics for student analysis. More than anything else, we wanted to find literary works that connected directly with students' lived experiences. During our search, we discovered Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Patricia Hampl's "Memory and Imagination," and William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. These readings and many others expanded the scope of nonfiction texts for us and our students. We began to understand that we were witness to a genre in the making, that of contemporary memoir (CM). This genre has topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for a number of years and has become increasingly popular among professional writers who often helpfully subtitle their books *A Memoir*. Looking for texts that exist outside our instructional walls and that lead students to improve their abilities in sophisticated reading, writing, critical thinking, and inquiry strategies, we found CM to be a genre ideally suited for teens of the 21st century.

Background of the Genre

In the early to mid-1970s, literary theorists began to identify a distinctive group of nonfiction writings

by a variety of new terms such as *literary nonfiction*, *creative nonfiction*, and *documentary narrative*. What distinguished these writings from conventional factual and informational texts was that they were not only well-researched accounts of real events or experiences but also artful narratives. They employed literary techniques borrowed from modern and postmodern novelists, including using distinguishable first-person voice, posing questions, and often injecting uncertainties and ruminations into their factual texts. Writers such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Michael Herr, John Hersey, and Lewis Thomas—all writers of bestselling nonfiction books—began to find themselves named as originators of a new genre. This genre of literary nonfiction continues to take shape in many forms: reportage, personal essay, biography, and memoir. Subgenres of literary nonfiction (LN) include nature, travel, and science writing, as well as CM. Writers of LN and CM tackle topics such as prison riots and life (e.g., Baca [CM]; Earley [LN]), environmental challenges (e.g., Ray [CM]; Gore [LN]), violence in American high schools (e.g., Hunter-Gault [CM]; Cullen [LN]), wilderness hiking and experiences (e.g., Bryson [CM]; Lopez [LN]), and the benefits of eating locally grown food (e.g., Kingsolver [CM]; Pollan [LN]).

Contemporary Memoir

Memoir, which has roots in autobiography, has existed as a published genre for much longer than most readers realize. Hampl (*I Could Tell*) dates the first

Western autobiography to Augustine's 13-volume *Confessions* in 397 A.D. Since then, presidents, corporate tycoons, generals, and numerous celebrities have acted on the need to recount their life stories. Early memoir consisted primarily of personal accounts by famous people, often written near the end of the authors' lives. At worst, these autobiographies were rambling, unreflective, inflated volumes that literary critics deemed marginal forms of literature unworthy of reading. Thankfully, during the last 20 years or so, autobiography and the old memoirs have been reborn as literary memoir and transformed into a dynamic and highly readable genre that we term contemporary memoir (Kirby and Kirby).

Our initial interest in CM was sparked by reading Baker's *Growing Up*, a work that may well have been the first in this new genre. In interviews following the bestseller success of his memoir, Baker acknowledges that he wasn't sure why anyone would be interested in the details of his life. Many of our students often share these sentiments. We tell students, who are unsure of the significance of their relatively short lives, that even Baker had those misgivings. But there are good reasons for writing life stories. For Baker, one of these reasons was his realization that when his ailing mother died, all of the stories of his childhood would die with her. He writes, "These hopeless end-of-the-line visits with my mother made me wish I had not thrown off my own past so carelessly" (8). He realizes that he has little knowledge of family lore and history and that he has not related many of the family stories and accounts to his children. He confesses this failing and states, "We all come from the past and children ought to know what went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord" (8).

This metaphor of the braided cord and the realization that they, too, have done little to explore and preserve their past resonates with students and motivates them as well as many published writers. They find satisfaction from sharing their personal, reflective, and illuminating accounts with various readers, working to focus on what we call "meaningful moments" in their lives. Despite the fact that some detractors of memoir have labeled it a confessional genre in which writers tell all to "an audience of voyeurs" (Atlas 25), or that others view CM as feeble psychoanalysis or redemptive journeys, such are not the primary aims of CM. Well-crafted CMs

derive their power not from narcissistic recounting or triviality, nor from a text version of reality television, but rather from the honest unfolding of human struggles and triumphs from which important lessons are learned, significant family events are preserved, and generations of family members braid the cord of their lived experiences. For both professional and student writers, the best CMs do not read like pages from diaries or tabloids, but rather like the rich stories of literary novels.

Like our students, many writers of CM were completely unknown prior to the publication of their books. As students read excerpts and entire CM books, however, we invite them to note how the tools of the novelist and the poet permeate the writing—to note the extent to which writers of CM frequently use conventional literary devices such as figurative language, metaphor, symbol, dialogue, scene-setting, interior monologue, imagery, and character development. Even more importantly, as Hampl notes, "the contemporary memoir has reaffirmed the primacy of the first person voice in American imaginative writing established by Whitman's 'Song of Myself'" (*I Could Tell* 19). The best examples of this reborn genre read like good novels rather than dry accounts of historic or daily events.

Successful and artful CMs illustrate ways that narrative permits writers to create *meaningful moments* that connect to a reader's life experience. Writers of CM use a compelling first-person voice and create detailed word-pictures for their readers. Certainly the most successful memoirs send readers on memory journeys of their own. In most good memoirs, the writer is using the genre to do more than just remember or describe people and events. Readers have a sense that memoirists use the form to experiment, solve puzzles and riddles present in their lives, pose sometimes unanswerable questions, and advance hypotheses and *what ifs* about their lived experiences. These are abilities and techniques that effective authors weave into all other forms of writing, from persuasion and argumentation to exposition and research.

Unique Features of Literary or Contemporary Memoir

We like CM not only because it has not been flattened and eviscerated by instruction but also because

it is a currently emerging and transitioning genre. Most students have not had the opportunity to study a legitimate contemporary genre, especially in non-fiction categories. That CM is presently morphing as a genre has created some problems for readers and book retailers. They may wonder, *What category of writing is CM, and where do I find it in bookstores and libraries?*

Usually, CM is still shelved in the biography section alongside conventional biography, autobiography, and a ragtag collection of memoirs of the old school. Some large chain bookstores have recently begun to display CMs just inside the main entrance, seizing, we

suppose, on the marketing opportunities of this increasingly popular genre.

Although CMs cover a wide variety of subjects and forms, they generally share some common characteristics:

- They are often episodic, making use of a number of short mini-stories of events and places (recounting *meaningful moments*).
- Many of these texts derive their continuity and sense of artistic unity through conventional narrative structures similar to those used in modern fiction, such as the narrative arc with its blueprint of introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Through the author's recounting of the unfolding of family members' lives over time, sometimes over multiple generations, a compelling story of family, not just of the individual writer, may emerge. It is this *collection of small stories and meaningful moments*, as we term it, that a memoirist transforms into a larger, more universal narrative that fascinates us so much as teachers. But CMs are more than just storytelling.
- Many of these texts depart from conventional narrative structures to explore postmodern structures. These writers of memoir leave things out. We often relate to students Annie Dillard's comment that, for her, the most difficult part of writing memoir is deciding "what to put in and what to leave out" (143). So there are blanks in these books, silences, if you will, often marked with symbols and

white space rather than with more traditional transitions. In fact . . .

- Memoirists often eschew transitions. In short, they leave readers to do some of the heavy lifting of intellectual engagement with a text. Writers of CM ask us to enter into the work of weaving the text into a coherent narrative alongside them. Any reader of post-modern fiction is already predisposed to this task, illustrating yet another way in which the conventions of fiction are making their way into CM.
- CMs are reflective and sometimes partially fictionalized creations that reveal truths and mysteries of lives we would never know if the author had not chosen to take us there. The issue of truth in memoir is one that must be addressed with student writers and by readers who are careful consumers of nonfiction narrative. We have developed particular strategies for doing so, as we discuss below.

Once students fully understand these unique features of CM through extensive reading and writing in the genre, they are ready to identify these *writerly* techniques in the CMs they read. Next, as student writers learn to manipulate these techniques within their own texts, their writing takes on a more lively voice, brims with insightful details and descriptions, and becomes more fully developed and cohesive.

Why Teach Contemporary Memoir?

In an era of high-stakes testing, the curriculum in many schools becomes not only prescriptive but also almost hermetically sealed. That which is not tested does not make its way into many curricula despite the fact that meaningful content and test items often are not identical. We see CM and the techniques that writers of CM employ as being the foundation of many texts and the bases of writing effectively in multiple genres, including those on mandated tests. In fact, as Hampl observes, CM resides at the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and exposition.

CM is nonfiction but employs the techniques of fiction as well as those of exposition, such as meaningful evidence-building and critical reflection about real events. Students in our classes who

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are writing their life stories ask questions about their lives for which they do not have answers. As these authentic questions arise, we guide students into research. For example, as students write about their names, they may research the meaning of their names; as they investigate the people for whom they are named, they may include details of researched family history in their writing. When students remember some, but not all, of a meaningful moment, they may interview others who were also present to gather additional eyewitness data, reconciling the multiple perspectives with their memories. Memoirists consider the meaning of factual data and the felt sense of their writing and seek to interweave the two. The writer's job is to find the relationships among the evidence and the remembrances of his or her own experiences. Memoir is constructed from facts and feelings, truths and near-truths. CM engages students in narrative writing but also requires them to examine and reflect—key elements of exposition. In this way, CM may serve as the missing link between personal narrative and expository writing that teachers have sought for decades. Through CM, our students learn to explore, remember, reflect, reveal, analyze, organize, prioritize, and understand.

We are able to meet multiple standards through reading and writing CM, a genre that lends itself to instructional differentiation better than most nonfiction forms. We teach CM because its themes encourage respect for difference and transformative interactions with cultural and ethnic diversity. Working with CM builds students' awareness of numerous genres, invites students' engagement with texts, and promotes students' meaningful use of technology as they create the specific appearance and form of their own memoir writing.

Implications for Using CM in the Classroom

Not only are we able to meet many of our goals and objectives for students' learning by teaching CM, but our students also gain valuable abilities and perspectives for interpreting texts that apply within and extend beyond the confines of school. For example, consider the following:

- *Students grapple with issues of Truth and truth.* Memoir benefits from recounting the details

of events, encounters, and exchanges. Details that are not clearly remembered but that are true to and representative of the people and situations involved make for good reading, if not for literal Truth. The details help to reveal the writer's best efforts to represent and relate lived experience. Zinsser provides a helpful discussion about dealing with issues of truth in memoir writing.

- *Students learn and experiment with post-modern conventions in their writing,* not just standard conventions, bringing essay writing into the 21st century. These post-modern conventions include fluxes in time, white spaces, blanks in the narrative, and shifting perspectives.
- *Students explore and expand the scope of the essay.* Conventional essays are perceived by many teachers and students as formal, impersonal, and highly structured. An examination of contemporary academic journals and published essays, however, will lead readers to notice that elements of narration—such as personal examples, a lively authorial voice, and metaphor—populate modern exposition. Many of the strictures of the formal essay are falling out of use. Experience with CM offers writers opportunities to realize that exposition at its best is both personal and personally meaningful. By writing CM, students may learn to use elements of narration to enliven their expository and academic writings.
- *Students work with their lived experiences.* When students write about *their* lives, they encounter a rare opportunity in formal education to know more about a topic than do their teachers. Even novice and developing writers are able to recall significant experiences, shape them into a written piece, and derive meaning from those events.
- *Students experience and necessarily practice the value of reflection.* Memoir is quite suitable for advanced and accomplished writers because of the reflective quality and flexibility of the form.
- *Students meaningfully employ literary tools.* Most students expect literary devices to appear in fictional works, but few realize their utility and significance for nonfiction. CM illustrates that effective writing shares many techniques across genres.

We find that studying and experimenting with CM provide invaluable knowledge for students' emergent experience with texts, literary conventions, and artistic innovations.

Practical Ideas for Student Writers: Mini-Memoirs

We are aware that instructional time is precious and pressured. All currently published CMs are books, a format and length that may be impractical for many instructional applications. However, because student writers benefit from reading and writing contemporary memoir in numerous ways, we have developed practical methods for using CM within typically crowded instructional time periods and curricular allotments. Specifically, we have developed and had excellent success with what we call *Mini-Memoirs*.

Mini-Memoirs—shorter, yet still effective, versions of full-blown CMs—allow student writers to explore multiple lenses for representing lived ex-

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periences and for effectively construing form, theme, and purpose just as published authors of CM do. We carefully pair readings of excerpts from published CMs with options and writing tools for student writers to explore in several short pieces that eventually may form the final Mini-Memoir. The following ideas offer possibilities for student writers of Mini-Memoirs. For each, we offer a bit of background, instructional applications, and suggestions for an exemplar reading. Although the excerpts we selected from these texts are suitable for use with adolescents, the entire book may not be; we encourage readers to preview materials carefully before using them for instruction.

1. Triptych: An Anchor Piece and Two Supporting Pieces¹

The writer uses triptych as a structure for pulling together three memory-based writings, juxtaposing them to make a statement about his or her life. We explore the history of triptych with students and then devise ways in which that form can be effectively used for writing a Mini-Memoir.

History of Triptych

Triptych literally means *three panels*. In early Greece, a triptych was a hinged or folded three-leaved writing tablet. Although this art form was most widely used during the Middle Ages, triptych is also quite post-modern in its contemporary renderings. It requires that viewers perform some of the mental work required to connect the meaning of the panels and thereby help ascribe meaning to the finished work.

Instructional Uses of Triptych

Triptych allows student writers to create three pieces of memoir writing that are literarily related. Connections may be in subject matter but they may also include, for example, relationships of motif, chronology, a person, or theme. The writer does not directly state the exact connection among the three pieces, which would lessen its impact much as explaining a joke lessens its humor. In an artistically rendered triptych, readers bring their experiences and interpretive backgrounds to the pieces, yielding insights about the writer's work.

This format works well for family pieces in which the student author and other family mem-



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bers appear. First, student writers decide which family member might form the central focus of the triptych. The piece about that person will be a longer, more elaborated piece of writing. Then, student writers select other family members to appear in the supporting pieces. The order in which the three pieces appear in the finished triptych helps to focus the reader's attention and clarify the author's emphases and theme.

Excerpt Idea

We have found that Elizabeth Cohen's *The House on Beartown Road* yields an exploratory context for triptych. Her anchor story laments her father's decline into Alzheimer's disease. One of her supporting stories contrasts her young daughter's developing mind with her father's failing mind, processes that often place the child and the grandfather on an equal mental level. Her final supporting story discloses personal struggles involved with living alone in a harsh environment.

2. Multiple Scenes from a Place

Student writers aim to reveal the magic of a special or important place through three (or more) descriptive views of the place. The first piece may be purely descriptive, while the other two pieces show the student author or others in action in the place. Alternately, the views may be chronological—the beach in the clear morning sun, at midday filled with sunbathers, and at the end of the day when littered and pocked with digs and ruts made by many bare feet. Or, the views may be seasonal. Herein lies an opportunity to remind students of the importance of showing people in action in the place, or the various elements of the place itself may be in action: the waves ebb, the pelicans dive, the surfboards sparkle. For writing tools, we coach student writers to use vivid verbs and descriptors, allowing us to embed teaching vocabulary, adjectives, and adverbs with the writing.

Excerpt Idea

Try excerpts from Linda Hasselstrom's *Feels Like Far: A Rancher's Life on the Great Plains* in which she writes of the emotional impact of returning to her family's South Dakota ranch.

3. Multiple Stories in Which an Artifact Reoccurs

An artifact is an object that holds significant meaning. Student writers select one artifact that is important to them or has been significant in their lives over time. Then they build three or more pieces around that artifact. The key is to show the importance of the artifact to the writer, how and why the artifact is significant, how it changes over time, and how the student author and others interact with it. Artifacts about which students have written include ballet shoes, a beloved teddy bear, a guitar, and a desk.

Excerpt Idea

In Charlotte Nekola's *Dream House: A Memoir*, a recipe book belonging to the author's mother is a treasured artifact that helps the author reveal much about her family, the time (1950s), and the place (St. Louis) in which they lived.

4. Multiple Views of a Writer's Life

These pieces may show a chronological or other temporal view of important events in the student writer's life: times the writer learned a valuable lesson, moments of emotional or psychological growth, episodes that yielded increased self-understanding or events that changed the writer. For this Mini-Memoir, students often write what we call *stepping stone* pieces, that is, pieces that follow the storyline of *Once Event #1 happened to me, then I was better able to deal with Events #2 and #3 when they occurred, or Now that Event #3 has occurred, I can look back and see that Events #1 and #2 yielded essential experiences that allowed me to cope with Event #3*. This last version is fruitful for teaching about verb tense and flashback.

A variation of this Mini-Memoir is *A Year in the Life*. In this variation, the author derives therapeutic effect from writing about difficult times. In the best memoirs of this type, the author's skill in reflecting on and telling her story draws the readers into their own reflective journeys of similar experiences. Student writers may draw readers into reflective contemplations of similar experiences as they relate the events of a particularly significant year in their lives: the year my parents divorced, the year my younger sister was born, or the year my mother battled breast cancer. Significant to the impact of

this type of writing is the author's revelation about the life lessons of this year.

Overall, Mini-Memoirs are flexible, practical forms with many applications for writing in several genres, especially CM, within the confines of test-focused curricular limitations.

Excerpt Ideas

Hanna Jansen in *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You* reveals her adopted daughter's story of surviving the 1994 Tutsi-Hutu genocide in Rwanda. The central event of the story is the genocide. After Jeanne is safe and living in Germany, she and her adoptive mother reflect on the terrifying events that Jeanne witnessed and come to terms with a new life.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion writes of the year her husband died while her daughter was gravely ill, reflecting on her processes for coping with grief.

In *Sky of Stone: A Memoir*, Homer Hickam writes about the summer break after his college freshman year when he worked in a coal mine supervised by his father and uncovered the mystery of his father's involvement in the death of a miner.

CM, a Genre on the Move

Contemporary memoir is suitable for readers of many ages, ability levels, and interests. It allows teachers to meet multiple standards and instructional goals while increasing students' experiences with nonfiction genres such as essay and research-based writing. CM is a genre on the move, one that is still developing, enabling students to see how the conventions of genres emerge and grow. Techniques present in the readings may be directly transferable to students' writings in a range of contexts. The mental engagement required by CM as a genre may promote self-awareness, multicultural understandings, and critical thinking. CM provides what may be an accessible bridge between personal narrative and expository writings. Most importantly, CM is about lives, and students have found great satisfaction in reflecting and writing about their lived experience. 

Note

1. For a more complete discussion of these forms of CM, see Kirby and Kirby.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In "Family Memoir: Getting Acquainted with Generations Before Us," students read a short memoir and then create a memoir of a family member. Many students will present written memoirs, and their essays will focus on one or two unifying themes. Students can choose instead to create an artistic representation for the memoir. Students accompany their work with an artist's journal, telling why they have chosen the particular method of presentation and analyzing their successes and shortcomings. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=998