



Memoir Writing and Workshopping with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

What Exactly Is Memoir?

A memoir is a piece of writing in which the author explores a specific time period or theme in his or her own life. Memoir differs from autobiography; while autobiographies strive to be comprehensive (they may span from birth to present age), memoirs typically have a more streamlined focus (a memoirist may, for example, focus on his childhood, or adolescence, or forty-year battle with an alcoholic father).

Also, while autobiographies aim for accuracy, memoirs tend to be as interested in *how* we remember an event as the event itself. Human memory is faulty and highly subjective; memoirists are interested in how memories form and evolve.

Why Are We Going to Write Memoirs?

Memoirs allow you to revisit intensively a significant event or time period in your life. However, as you create yourself as a character, you also give yourself some distance from the event or time period. This allows you some insight that you didn't have at the time. For writers who are exploring something particularly difficult, memoir writing can offer a sense of control and purpose in the face of tragedy and chaos.

We will be reading parts of each others' memoirs as well in self-selected workshops. When you read somebody else's story, you develop a deep sense of empathy. This will not only encourage you to develop trusting relationships with your classmates, but it will help you empathize with the narrators of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, whose experiences may be quite different from your own. We will dedicate a significant portion of class on Fridays to memoir writing.

What's the Timeline?

Friday, September 28: One-Word Biographies

Friday, October 12: Exploring Artifacts

Monday, October 15: Looking at Yourself from the Ceiling / Using Sensory Imagery

Tuesday, October 16: Using Dialogue

Wednesday, October 17: Seeking Turning Points and Forming Narrative Shape

Monday, October 22: ROUGH DRAFT due in www.turnitin.com BEFORE CLASS; workshop

Friday, October 26: FINAL DRAFT due in www.turnitin.com by 3:00 PM.

What Are the Expectations for Workshop?

Rule #1: Don't talk about workshop.

Here's what I mean by this: what somebody shares with you in workshop is not to be shared outside of this classroom. It's nobody's business. What happens in workshop stays in workshop.

Rule #2: Say "speaker" or "narrator" instead of "you" when workshopping somebody else's piece.

So, instead of saying "When *you* ran away from home...", you'd say, "When *the narrator* ran away from home..." The narrator in the story is not the same thing as the person sitting in front of you. Also, this helps create a little distance that makes everyone in workshop more comfortable.

Rule #3: When you're being workshopped, you may not speak.

We tend to get a little defensive when people critique our memoirs. We want to jump in and explain ourselves. However, this should be a time for you simply to listen, take notes, and absorb what's being said about your writing.

Rule #4: Start with the positive.

Nothing deflates a workshop like editors who start with negative comments. Start with what's working for you--what you liked, what you loved, what resonated with you. Then, when you move into critique, keep it constructive. Try offering your critique in the form of questions instead of harsh statements ("What was the mother trying to do in the second paragraph?" vs. "The mother in the second paragraph didn't even make any sense!").

Rule #5: Take constructive risks.

Want to try writing your memoir in the form of a poem instead of paragraphs? Go for it! Want to try writing from a different perspective? Yes! Want to write about something you've never talked about before? That's what memoir is for.