

Reflections On A Life

A Critical Examination of Memoirs

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Critical Examination of Memoirs

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Introduction

Writing memoirs means illuminating “places that hide in your heart” (Heard, 1998). The writing of a memoir involves a soulful search for the themes that lie deep within their hearts and are constantly replayed in their brains. Unlike an autobiography, memoir is not the story of one’s entire life but an attempt to present a vital piece.

Throughout this unit, students will be asked to critically think about the importance of memory and history in their lives and in larger historical contexts. Through mentor texts, students will understand the nature of memoir and reflect analytically and critically for descriptive techniques to employ in their personal writing. The essential questions present avenues in which to elicit the subject of their memoir and to explore different ways to present their slice of life.

Essential Questions

1. Why is memory and history in my own life and in larger historical contexts critically important to recall and to value?
2. What can I learn about structuring my memoir from studying mentor texts?
3. How can I show myself and my life through my memory?
4. How can memories be structured to make my writing powerful, honest, graceful, intimate, and significant?

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Introducing Memoirs

Uncovering Mentor's Life Topics Through Booktalking

Students will first choose a memoir to read because great literature calls us from our hiding places, helping us to bring ourselves to the page (Calkins, 2001). In addition, the reading of memoirs allows students to have a constant mentor text to notice structure and craft.

1. Booktalk the novels cited in the bibliography.
2. Distribute *Reflections On A Life: Mentor Texts*, a list of the booktalked memoirs, to facilitate students' marking of their top three novel selections.
3. Discuss *Student Reflection: Response to Memoir Reading* as a form for synthesizing their understanding of the novel.

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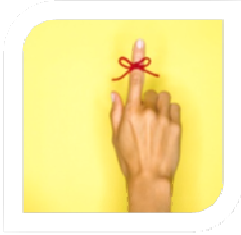
Mentor Texts

Indicate your first, second, and third choice of memoir to read.

- Little By Little A Memoir* - Jean Little
- A Girl from Yamhill* - Beverley Cleary
- Exiled: Memoirs Of A Camel* - Kathleen Karr
- Sing a Song of Tuna Fish* - Esme R. Codell
- Don't Tell the Girls: A Family Memoir* - Patricia Reilly Giff
- Three Cups Of Tea Young Readers Edition* - Greg Mortenson
- Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life* - Lee Bennett Hopkins
- When I Was Your Age* - Amy Ehrlich
- Notebooks of Melanin Sun* - Jacqueline Woodson
- Journey* - Patricia MacLachlan
- Childtimes* - Eloise Greenfield
- Marshfield Dreams: When I Was a Kid* - Ralph Fletcher
- Hey World, Here I Am!* - Jean Little
- The House on Mango Street* - Sandra Cisneros
- Knots In My Yo-Yo String* - Jerry Spinelli
- Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio* - Peg Kehret
- A Boy In War* - Jan de Groot
- The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* - Farley Mowat
- Bad Boy* - Walter Dean Myers
- How Angel Peterson Got His Name* - Gary Paulsen
- But I'll Be Back Again* - Cynthia Rylant
- The Lost Childhood: A Memoir* - Yehuda Nir
- The Moon and I* - Betsy Byars
- No Pretty Pictures* - Anita Lobel
- A Circle Of Quiet* - Madeleine L'Engle

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Introducing Memoirs



Student Reflection: Response to Memoir Reading

Name: _____

Book Title: _____

Remember the qualities of an effective memoir that we applied to our writing earlier in the term. Which one of these applies to your novel? Explain why they relate to your novel, or perhaps why they did not.

The following prompts can be used to focus your book response. Choose at least three to respond to. Challenge yourself to think deeply and respond critically.

I like the way the author . . .

I wish that . . .

I was surprised when/angry about/moved by . . .

I do not understand why the author . . .

The book reminded me of . . .

The structure of this book . . .

The genre of this book . . .

Other connections or understandings that arose from my reading include . . .

Source: (Atwell, N. 2007)

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Valuing Memories

Source: [“Memories Matter”](#), [ReadWriteThink](#)

In this session, students “discuss the importance of having a recorded history of humanity as they gain a deeper understanding of the horror of Jonas’s dystopian society in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. This understanding generates a keen interest in and context for the descriptive writing of students’ own history” ([“Memories Matter”](#), [ReadWriteThink](#)).

1. Display the [Excerpt from Chapter 10 of *The Giver*](#).
2. Focusing on The Giver’s comments about wisdom and shaping the future, facilitate a brief discussion of the importance of memory and history.
3. Encourage students to use examples from their lives, history, and the novel to support their points.

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Mentor Text – The Past Influences The Present

Source: [Family Memoir, Read Write Think](#)

In this session, mentor texts will serve as models for students' growing understanding of memoir.

1. Listen to the [NPR podcast](#) in which Walter Dean Myers talks about the importance of storytelling, writing his memoirs, and using photographs as inspiration.
2. Ask students to identify the focus of the podcast, and the time that prompted writing *Bad Boy* – which Zinsser describes as the “time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid”.
3. Discuss what students understand, from reading and from writing, the nature of memoir.

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Mentor Text – What You Know First

1. In the next sessions, present students with mentor texts.
 - *What You Know First* (MacLauchlan)
 - *When The Relatives Came* (Rylant)
2. Read an excerpt of the text. Model how to leave tracks of your thinking using a think aloud.
3. Distribute a copy of the mentor text. Ask students to leave tracks of their thinking – to point out words and/or details that they find powerful.
4. Reconvene as a class. Record their response on the board or on chart paper.
5. Once the list is compiled, conduct a discussion about *why* the words are powerful. Note the qualities of powerful words on the board or chart paper as well.
6. Return to the [Memoir Definition](#), and ask students to identify the focus of the picture books, and the time that prompted this book—what Zinsser describes as the “time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid”.

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Student Reflection of Mentor Text

Source: (Atwell, N. 2007)

1. Challenge students to reflect upon their novel they selected from the first lesson with the lens of “What makes this a quality memoir?”. The following questions can guide the reflection:

Copy one or two sentences that you find especially powerful. What makes them powerful? (Some suggestions might be: powerful words, rhythm of the sentences, details, images.)

Is this text a successful memoir? Why or why not?

2. Discuss the author’s method for instilling a “So What?”- a sense of purpose for writing about this topic.
3. Invite students to reflect upon those criteria as they write memoir. As writers, do they instigate a feeling that this subject matters, a subject that will allow them to go below the surface, to push their thinking, and find meaning in the experiences, ideas, and feelings.

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Writing Small About Big Topics

Source: Caulkins, L. (2006). “*Writing Small About Big Topics*”. Memoir: The Art Of Writing Well.

1. Inform students that the bigger the topic, the smaller one will need to write.
2. Suggest that writers need to write with topics that are both big...and small. Share *Crow Call* by Lois Lowry, a text in which the writer has used tiny details to convey a Life Topic. Other mentor texts could include de Paola’s *The Art Lesson* or Rylant’s *When I Was Young in the Mountains*.
3. Punctuate how the author has written about a huge Life Topic and embedded that Life Topic into a Small Moment story (Calkins, 2006).
4. Revisit the stories by MacLachlan and Rylant – how did the author write small about a big topic?

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Mapping The Heart

Source: Atwell, N. (2007). “*Heart Mapping*”. *Lessons From Writers*.

1. Invite students to begin searching their mind for memories that continually live in their heart.
2. Display a heart map— “a literal drawing of where our feelings reside, students explore the territory of their feelings and map memories, objects, people, places, and comforts that remain in their heart” (Atwell, 2007).
3. Invite students to look for common themes in their writing. Calkins (2006) states that “many great writers agree that most of us, as writers, have a few great Life Topics that we continually revisit”. Ask students to consider these threads as potential seed ideas for their memoir.

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Looking Smaller And Deeper

Source: Caulkins, L. (2006). “*Writing Small About Big Topics*”. *Memoir: The Art Of Writing Well*.

1. Introduce the expectation from the students – the writing of a memoir with each student choosing what to say and in what form. This can be an anthology of poems, a narrative, a picture book.
2. Display a collection of memoirs, representing an array of structures.
3. Remind students that Calkins states that “many great writers agree that most of us, as writers, have a few great Life Topics that we continually revisit” (2006). Invite students to consider that Patricia MacLachlan, a mentor author, stories share a common theme – a longing for home.
4. Provide students with poems from an anthology such as *Childtimes* or *When I Was Your Age: Original Stories About Growing Up*.
5. Students, with a partner, discuss the memoir to examine if the author wrote a big Life Topic, and yet wrote small.
6. Invite students to again look through their heart maps for potential stories to locate subjects that thread their way through much of what we have written.

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Choosing and Developing A Seed Idea

Source: Fletcher, R. and Portalupi, J. (2005). "Starting A Seed Idea", *Lessons For The Writer's Notebook- Grades 3-6*.

Caulkins, L. (2006). "Choosing and Developing A Seed Idea", *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*.

1. Celebrate students' readiness to select a seed idea and direct their writing towards the development of that idea into a finished memoir.
2. Ralph Fletcher, a distinguished author, had a seed idea in his writer's notebook that was related to the harvest moon. Show students the "Harvest Moon" notebook excerpt (*Lessons for The Writers Notebook*).
3. Ralph Fletcher eventually wrote a picture book about the harvest moon. Referring to the notebook excerpt, facilitate a discussion with the following guiding questions:
 - Do you think he used all the entries in the finished book?
 - Some?
 - Which ones do you think he used?
4. Listen to Ralph Fletcher talk about developing a seed idea (Audio Segment #4, *Lessons for The Writers Notebook*).
5. Remind students that the goal of the unit will be to write a memoir. Share that developing a seed idea takes time and intense reflection.
6. Reflect on Fletcher's strategies for generating and selecting between possible directions for writing.
 - Read entries and mark the ones that light sparks, trying not to disregard any
 - Mark small parts that stand out
 - Reread marked entries, looking for connections and patterns.
 - Categorize the most powerful writing into several possible Life topics
 - Chose one Life Topic and reread the entries on that topic
 - Write an entry, combining various images and ideas related to this seed idea.
7. Ask students to think about what the writer has done that they might also do. This requires students to look closely and to think about the larger ideas that a seed idea possesses.

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Studying Memoir Structures And The Qualities of Successful Memoir

Source: Caulkins, L. (2006). "Studying Memoir Structures", *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*.

Atwell, N. (2007). "The Rule of So What?". *Lessons From Writers*.

Atwell, N. (2007). "Ineffective and Effective Memoirs.". *Lessons From Writers*.

1. Invite students to examine mentor texts with the lens of the structure of the texts.
2. Provide student with exemplars of memoirs written in a variety of structures. Examples could be "Laughter" from *The House On Mango Street*, "Alone" by Jacqueline Woodson, "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros, and "Not Enough Emilys" from *Hey World, Here I Am* by Jean Little.
3. After students have had a chance to turn and talk, have students share their observations.
4. Invite students to share how the author pushed the story toward finding a meaning and answering the question, "So What?".
5. Invite students to re-examine the mentor texts with the lens of the structure of the texts.
6. After students have had a chance to turn and talk, have students again share their observations.
7. Chart some ways to structure a memoir.
8. Remind student that they have options in the work they do of structuring, planning, and writing memoir. However, their memoir must contain a "So What?"- a sense of purpose for writing about this topic.

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An Author's Final Celebration

Source: Caulkins, L. (2006). "An Author's Final Celebration". *Memoir: The Art Of Writing Well*.

Preparing For The Event

1. Students choose one memoir (if they have written a collection or an anthology) to feature at the celebration.
2. As a final step, they should dedicate the memoir to give readers an overview of the memoir.
3. Bind a copy of the memoirs to create a class anthology.
4. If desired, convert their memoirs into audio interviews like the ones featured in [StoryCorps](#). Collect the audio files and house them on a class Web page.
5. Have students present their memoirs through brief speeches to peers for practice. Peers can provide additional feedback for continued revision and refinement.
6. Use the [Descriptive Memoir Rubric](#) to evaluate student work.
7. After students have finished the memoir writing process, ask them to complete the [Descriptive Memoir Project Final Reflection](#) for additional confirmation of their new learning.
8. Invite parents and other special guests.

The Event

1. Have students present their memoirs through brief speeches.
2. Provide refreshments.
3. Celebrate!

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