

History 601: Faces of Narcissus? Autobiographies, Memoirs and History
Prof . James R. Farr
T 6-9 p.m.
UNIV 319

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Description:

Over the course of history men and women have often been impelled to tell their own life story. This telling frequently takes the form of an autobiography or a memoir. As important as these remembrances may have been for the author, they also can be exceptional types of evidence for historians. Historians may interrogate these sources for many reasons. Among them are author intention (why did the author decide to write down his or her life?), and intended audience (did the author hope for others to read his or her life? If so, who? And did audiences read the life in the way the author intended?) Moreover, by placing these sources in historical context, historians can also move beyond intentions and analyze these sources as “unwitting testimony” about a wide variety of historical developments. Students in this seminar will begin by exploring theories of analysis of these kinds of writings, and follow with readings of several autobiographies from history. Each student will be required to write a series of papers throughout the semester and a retrospective essay at the end.

Required Readings:

See Class schedule (most of the books can be purchased in hard copy inexpensively on-line, but several are available free for online reading or download; the books/articles that are not available online have been placed on reserve in the Hicks Undergraduate Library)

Grading:

Two self-narratives (“Just Who Do I Think I Am, Anyway?” 500 words each)—5%

Five analyses* (750 words each) of books from the required readings---35%

One analysis and critique (1000 words) and 15-20 minute in-class presentation of an autobiography selected by each student---10%

One commentary on another student’s presentation—5%

Retrospective Essay: “Historians and Autobiography: Problems and Prospects” (2500 words)---20%

Class Participation. Be prepared to participate in or to lead a class discussion on any given week---25%

Note: see Class Schedule for due dates on all assignments. Writing assignments may be submitted as e-mail attachments.

*An analysis is not a synopsis, nor is it a critique. You will be expected to identify the author's thesis, explain how s/he develops and supports it (a brief discussion of sources and methodology is appropriate here), and state what the historical and historiographical significance of the book is.

Class Schedule (Read and be prepared to discuss the assigned readings in class):

8/21: Introduction

8/28, 9/4: *Hello, it's me! The Individual and the Autonomous Self*

8/28:

Olney, James. "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction." In James Olney, ed. *Autobiography: Essays, Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. Pp. 3-27.[On Reserve]

Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." In James Olney, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980: p. 28-48.[On Reserve]

Mandel, Barrett J. "Full of Life Now." In James Olney, ed. *Autobiography: Essays, Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1980. Pp. 49-72.[On Reserve]

9/4:

Weintraub, Karl Joachim. *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. University of Chicago Press, 1978. [on reserve][**1st analysis due**]

9/11: *Whose life is this, anyway?* [**self-narratives due**]

Evans, Mary. *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*. Routledge, 1999.[available online][Skip Chapter 3]

Rak, Julie. "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity" *Genre* 37: 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2004): 483-504. [On Reserve]

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. [on-line] Read chapters 4, 5 and Appendix A. **Read these before you select your autobiography for analysis and critique and presentation.**

9/18: *Who is 'I'? Narrative and Identity*

Somers, Margaret R. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational Network Approach." *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 605-649. [on-line, JSTOR]

Eakin, Paul John. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. [available online][**2nd analysis due**]

9/25: *A Different Voice: Women and Autobiography*

Stanton, Domna. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, p. 131-144. [on reserve]

Nussbaum, Felicity. "The Politics of Subjectivity and the Ideology of Genre." In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Pp.160-167. [on reserve]

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." In Shari Benstock, ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. Pp. 34-62. [on reserve]

Smith, Sidonie. "Autobiographical Manifestos." In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Pp. 433-440. [on reserve]

10/2: *Other voices: Postcolonialism*

Holden, Philip. *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation-State*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. [on reserve][**3rd analysis due**]

10/16, 10/23, 10/30, 11/6, 11/13: *The Faces of Narcissus: Putting it to Work* [write analyses on **two** of the following autobiographies: Prince, Ménetra, Hickey, and McCarthy]

10/16:

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Read chapters 1-3 and 7-9. [available online]

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince A West Indian Slave* [available online; free Kindle Edition]

10/23:

Maynes, Mary Jo, Jennifer Pierce and Barbara Laslett. *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.[available on-line]

Ménetra, Jacques-Louis. *Journal of My Life*. Ed. Daniel Roche. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. [on reserve]

10/30:

Hickey, William. *Memoirs*. [Multiple editions available; *Memoirs of William Hickey*, ed. Alfred Spencer, 4 vols. 1912-1925; *The Prodigal Rake*, ed. Peter Quennell, 1962, 1975; *Memoirs of a Georgian Rake*, ed. Roger Hudson, Folio Society, 1995.[Quennell and Hudson on reserve, Spencer on-line] [select and read one of the editions; If you choose Spencer, just read two volumes, your choice]

11/6:

Smith, Sidonie A., and Julia Watson. "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices." In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Pp. 3-52[on reserve]

McCarthy, Mary. *How I Grew*. Orig. pub. 1987; Mariner Books, 2004. [on reserve]

11/13:

Self-narratives

11/27: Get a Life! Student presentations [**individual analysis and critique and commentary due on day of presentation**]

12/4: Student presentations

12/14: **Retrospective Essay Due**

Course and Instructor Evaluation: During the last two weeks of the semester, you will be provided an opportunity to evaluate this course and your instructor. To this end, Purdue has transitioned to online course evaluations. On Monday of the fifteenth week of classes, you will receive an official email from evaluation administrators with a link to the online evaluation site. You will have two weeks to complete this evaluation. Your participation in this evaluation is an integral part of this course. Your feedback is vital to improving education at Purdue University. I strongly urge you to participate in the evaluation system.

Disclaimer: In the event of a major campus emergency, the above requirements, deadlines and grading policies are subject to changes that may be required by a revised semester calendar. Any such changes in this course will be posted, once the course resumes, on the course website or can be obtained by contacting the instructor via email or phone.