

“Everyone has a story, everyone has a right to tell it, and a reason to tell it,”

— Michael Steinberg

MEMOIRS

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In addition to Ms. Griest and Mr. Steinberg's seminars, Neal Pollack, author of "Alternadad," will give a class in Comic Memoir. And William Girdali, a writing professor who teaches a course in memoir to his students at Boston University, will deliver a class in Writing About Grief.

The conference sponsored by Florida Gulf Coast University is in its third



Michael Steinberg

Author: "Still Pitching" and, with Robert Root, Jr., "The Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction" and "Those Who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching."



Steinberg

>>Recommended memoirs: "A Romantic Education" by Patricia Hampl and "Fierce Attachments" by Vivian Gornick
"These set the curve for the kind of memoir that I think is good literary work. Patricia Hampl is such a smart writer

about memoir, what memoir is. Because that's her form, she's able to do things with it that many people can't. And Vivian Gornick's 'Fierce Attachments' is a great book. It's a mother-daughter story that it takes place in Brooklyn. Gornick is a very, very edgy writer. Hampl is not. Hampl is a more romantic writer, but not romantic-light. And Gornick's written a book called 'The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative,' which I think is the best story on nonfiction, especially on memoir."

year now, but this is the first time it has presented such an abundance of memoir-writing classes. The numerous offerings reflect the growing popularity of the genre.



Stephanie Elizondo Griest

Author: "Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana" and "Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines"



Griest

>>Recommended memoir: "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood" by Alexandra Fuller
'Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight' is absolutely extraordinary. Fuller has a brilliant way of writing about race,

about different cultures, as well as about death, family, class. It covers such a wide range of human experience. It's absolutely brilliant. I've read about 80 memoirs in my life, and I think it's the best-written."

"I think Tom DeMarchi, the conference director, is realizing that there's a bigger demand," says Mr. Girdali. "And there are so many different kinds of memoir writing. You want to write. Are you old enough to write your entire autobiography, from the time you were born to last year, or do you want to write a collection of personal essays that aren't necessarily linear,

like Tom Lynch, or do you want to write a sort of standard, 21st century contemporary memoir? Do you want to write about grief, or do you want to write about funny stuff, like David Sedaris?"

"I think the reason there are so many different memoir classes at Sanibel is that there are so many different kinds of people that the memoir form, the autobiographical form, caters to."

Anybody's genre

A few decades ago, the biography section of bookstores was stocked with books about famous people: celebrities, movie stars, historic figures. Now the shelves are full of memoirs penned by the non-famous focusing on their own lives: waiters, booksellers, schoolteachers, mothers — all people whose names weren't known before they published.

"Everyone has a story, everyone has a right to tell it, and a reason to tell it," Mr. Steinberg declares. "And that's a different impulse, I think, than where fiction and poetry come from. Memoirs are anybody's genre; you don't have to have a crazy life to write a good memoir. Actually, it's better if you don't. Because then you can reflect on what the humanness is in it."

But memoirs certainly have their share of stories about people with a "crazy life." Many are written by a decidedly seedy crowd: drug addicts, strippers, prostitutes, criminals. Instead of finding fame because they discovered penicillin or climbed Mt. Everest, some memoirists are famous because of their bulimia, anorexia, drug habits or sexual addiction.

Mr. Girdali points to the explosion of TV talk shows in the mid-90s, hosted by Oprah Winfrey, Phil Donahue, Sally Jesse Raphael, Jenny Jones and Jerry Springer.

"Many of these memoirs are sort of just the literary — and I use that word loosely in this case — the literary equivalent of these talk shows," he says. "People wanted sensational stories about sex and drugs and alcoholism and incest. Because Americans really like to see a success story, especially when someone is succeeding after having been a failure. We love stories of redemption, and that's partially because we're a Christian nation. So redemption is central to our whole theology."

"We like to see people who were down and out and then have risen from the ashes, almost like a phoenix... It's about the American promise. That's supposed to be what America is about."

That's just one side of memoirs, says New York literary agent Christopher Schelling, who agrees that some of the popularity of memoirs has do with our becoming a more confessional society. "At the low end of it," Mr. Schelling says, "you see it on Jerry Springer." At the higher end, he adds, "It's people being more reflective about their lives." In general, as more books were being published, "It sort of made sense to have stories out there that people relate to in that way. There's the a-ha! moment of 'Yes! that's my life too!'"

Mr. Schelling says some memoirs celebrate "the return to normalcy. It's the quotidian."

Following the trend

Publishing operates largely on



Neal Pollack

Author, "Alternadad," "Never Mind the Pollacks" and "The Neal Pollack Anthology of American Literature"



Pollack

>>Recommended memoirs: "Act One" by Moss Hart and "King of the Hill" by A.E. Hotchner
"This is really going back a long way, but I love this book by a guy named Moss Hart... a Broadway playwright in Broadway's golden age."

He wrote a fantastic book about getting started in the theater called 'Act One.' I just adore that book. The details are so right. It combines the end of a certain kind of immigrant life in America and is also about the birth of this glorious, artistic scene. It's very evocative.

"I also like A.E. Hotchner's 'King of the Hill,' the Depression-era memoir that the Steven Soderbergh movie was made from. That's a lovely book."

trends, he says, and when publishers saw that some memoirs were successful, everyone rushed to publish more memoirs.

"You look around, and everything seems to be a memoir," Mr. Schelling says. "Suddenly there are too many of them, and publishers say, 'Oh no, memoirs don't sell.' You end up going



William Girdali

Professor in the Writing Program at Boston University and senior fiction editor for the journal AGNI



Girdali

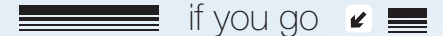
>>Recommended memoir: "Goodbye to All That" by Robert Graves
"If I had to recommend a memoir, I would really have to recommend 'Goodbye to All That,' an autobiography by Robert Graves. It's a masterpiece of the form..."

really smart, beautifully written, devastatingly sad. It's one of those books that teach you how to write, which cannot be said for most memoirs, most autobiographies. We're talking about an English master here... Robert Graves is about as important as it gets. It's one of those books that's not only important and universal and devastating, but it's so beautifully written that it will actually teach you how to write better."

through cycles like that. Suddenly everyone has tons of these things on their list, until the market is flooded with them, nothing is selling well, and it gets blamed on the category, as opposed to: We feasted and gorged, and now we have to throw up."

But memoirs are still selling.

"I don't feel we're at the point where people are saying, 'We don't buy any more of that, those don't sell,'" he says. "I feel that that's coming, but... it's certainly not that dire. I definitely hear, 'Oh, we have a lot on our list.' A lot of them were bought, maybe it was bought from a proposal, and it's going to take a year for them to write it, and then another year before it's published, so there's still a lot in inventory. We'll be seeing a lot of them for years to come."



if you go

>> What: Sanibel Island Writers Conference
>> When: Nov. 6-9
>> Where: BIG Arts, 900 Dunlop Road, Sanibel Island
>> Cost: \$350
>> Information: Go to www.fgcu.edu/siwc/
>> Readings: Readings will be held from 6 – 7:30 p.m. Nov. 6-8; cost for the public to attend is \$5 per night, except for Nov. 8, which is \$10 and includes a concert by John K. Samson singer/songwriter of The Weakerthans. For more information, call (607) 423-2898 or go to: www.fgcu.edu/siwc/

And some agents and publishers continue to urge their writers to create more memoirs.

Ms. Griest, who's written two already, says she's working on a new book that's about "a very massive subject. My agent wants me to turn it into a memoir."

But Ms. Griest doesn't want to.

"Part of being a writer is that people want you to write the same thing you've written, but in a different format," she says. "I'm trying to be resistant against that. I want it to be more expansive than just myself."

Mr. Pollack used to write fiction. His agent and editor urged him to put his new parenting experiences into a memoir. So he did. He's currently working on another novel, but the book they're excited about is the memoir he's also working on now: his experiences of becoming a yoga teacher in Los Angeles.

"Yes, I'm working on a novel, but those are hard to sell," he says. "A memoir with a good hook and a good point of view is just easier to get interest in."

But, Mr. Pollack says, "There's a lot of good memoir writing. It just so happens that we live in an age where memoir has become the dominant literary form. I think it's because more than anything, they're easier to market. You gotta sell books to keep a literary career going, and it's easier to get the radio and TV people interested in a 'personal story' with a hook. Say 'I have a very sophisticated novel that illuminates the human condition in untold ways,' and they'll hang up on you pretty quick."

"I think memoirs are popular because our culture and our media just respond very strongly to that personal narrative. I don't think that's necessarily a good thing. Good fiction illuminates our lives and our worlds better in some ways. But it's just a fact of the marketplace."

Mr. Girdali echoes him: "I think people have an erroneous notion that memoir is truer than fiction," he says. "They believe that because a story is true that it is, somehow, more meaningful, or more useful. And of course, that's not the case at all."

"Fiction is much truer than non-fiction. The truths that one gets from a novel are much more profound, and much truer, than the truths one may get from a memoir. And the reason has to do with imagination and poetic license. I'm talking about emotional truths here, the truth of emotions. I think in the second half of the 20th century, when electronic entertainment began to attain sovereignty over our attention, readers got to be a little duller."

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