

Writing the Self as a Character: Crafting “I” in Memoir

Instructor: Mina Witteman

Course Length: 6 Sessions

Course Format: Seminar and Workshop

Materials: Recommended readings, notebook or laptop for in-class writing

Course Overview

In memoir, “I” is not merely the person who lived the story—it’s the character who tells it. This course explores how to shape that “I” with the same craft tools that we use when writing fiction: characterization, voice, scene construction, and emotional arc. Through readings, discussion, and writing exercises, students will learn to write themselves as both narrator and protagonist, crafting an authentic, layered self on the page. As a bonus, we will welcome memoirists Dorothy Lazard (*What You Don’t Know Will Make a Whole New World*) and Adam Hochschild (*Half the Way Home*) in our class.

By the end of the course, students will:

- Understand the distinction between the *narrating self* and the *experiencing self*
- Employ fiction techniques to develop a compelling narrator
- Balance scene, summary, and reflection for emotional rhythm
- Refine tone and voice for credibility and resonance
- Trace a personal arc that reflects transformation

Session Breakdown

Session 1: Who Is “I”? The Memoirist as Character

Goal: Establish memoir as narrative, not confession. Explore the *narrating* vs. *experiencing* self.

- **Presentation:** What makes a character compelling? What makes a memoirist trustworthy?
- **Readings:** *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son* (Adam Hochschild); *Raising Hare: A Memoir* (Chloe Dalton)
- **Discussion:** How do these authors shape themselves on the page?
- **Exercise:** Draft two versions of a formative moment—one from the “then self,” one from the “now self.”
- **Homework:** Write a short life scene in third person.

Session 2: Constructing the Self—Characterization Techniques from Fiction (with Adam Hochschild)

Goal: Use fiction craft (desire, contradiction, stakes, flaws) to deepen the “I.”

- **Presentation:** Internal/external desires, agency, consistency vs. growth
- **Readings:** *What You Don’t Know Will Make a Whole New World* (Dorothy Lazard); *Fierce Attachments* (Vivian Gornick)
- **Discussion:** How do these writers layer complexity into “I”?
- **Q&A:** Adam Hochschild
- **Exercise:** Build a “character profile” of your past self during a major life event.
- **Homework:** Revise your third-person scene into first person using this profile.

Session 3: Scene, Summary, and Reflection—Three Gears of Memoir

Goal: Control time and tone through structure and pacing.

- **Presentation:** The three gears of memoir; rhythm and emotional insight
- **Readings:** *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Jacqueline Woodson); *The Woman Warrior* (Maxine Hong Kingston)
- **Discussion:** How do scene, summary, and reflection build the narrator's presence?
- **Exercise:** Rewrite a summary-heavy memory as a scene; then add reflection.
- **Homework:** Bring a scene that feels "flat" or incomplete.

Session 4: Voice, Tone, and Emotional Distance (with Dorothy Lazard)

Goal: Understand how tone and emotional honesty shape trust and resonance.

- **Presentation:** Emotional honesty vs. sentimentality; unreliable narrators; tonal shifts
- **Readings:** *Why Fathers Cry at Night* (Kwame Alexander); *Stop-Time* (Frank Conroy)
- **Discussion:** How do tone and voice evolve over the course of a memoir?
- **Q&A:** Dorothy Lazard
- **Exercise:** Write a vulnerable moment in two contrasting tones (e.g., wry vs. tender).
- **Homework:** Expand one version into a longer scene with intentional tone.

Session 5: Dialogue, Interior Monologue, and Revealing the Inner World

Goal: Balance outer action and inner thought to reveal complexity.

- **Presentation:** Authentic dialogue vs. "remembered" speech; tension through interiority
- **Readings:** Lazard and Hochschild (revisited)
- **Discussion:** How do dialogue and interior monologue reveal self-awareness?
- **Exercise:** Rewrite a life scene layering in internal monologue and dialogue.
- **Homework:** Recreate a "silent" memory through setting and interior shifts alone.

Session 6: Revision as Re-Vision—Shaping the Arc of the Self

Goal: View memoir as a story of transformation—how "I" changes over time.

- **Presentation:** Mapping growth, reframing scenes, and revealing deeper stakes
- **Readings:** *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson); *Fierce Attachments* (Gornick)
- **Discussion:** How does the narrator's change shape structure and theme?
- **Exercise:** Map your emotional arc through 3–5 turning points.
- **Final Activity:** Share a revised scene or reflection; group feedback.

Recommended reading:

Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son, Adam Hochschild – Mariner Books

What You Don't Know Will Make a Whole New World, Dorothy Lazard – Heyday Books

Fierce Attachments: A Memoir, Vivian Gornick – Farrar Straus Giroux

Why Fathers Cry at Night: A Memoir in Love Poems, Letters, Recipes, and Remembrances, by Kwame Alexander – Little Brown

Stop-Time, Frank Conroy - Penguin

Brown Girl Dreaming, Jacqueline Woodson – Nancy Paulsen Books (Penguin)

The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, Maxine Hong Kingston – Vintage Books

Raising Hare: A Memoir, Chloe Dalton – Pantheon