Section 4, The Literary Memoir – Show, Tell, Muse
Write-by-the-Lake Writer’s Workshop & Retreat
June 13-17, 2016
9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day
Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

Instructor: Coleman

Sharing your innermost conflicts, feelings and experiences with another person is daunting, leaving one vulnerable and exposed. Publishing a memoir for the whole world to read is exposure of a different magnitude altogether.

But memoir without self-exposure is akin to food without flavor. To make your memoir compelling, you must be willing to intensely flavor it with the raw ingredients of your life.

A series of life anecdotes is not a memoir. It is a series of anecdotes. They may be great anecdotes, well written. But they do not comprise a memoir. A memoir is a revelation of an awakening of spirit that springs from the resolution of an inner conflict manifested in experience and disclosed in narrative. That awakening of spirit is the throughline of the book – the heart and soul that holds it together; that rivets the reader; that propels the narrative from beginning to middle to end.

When you begin your memoir, you may or may not know what your throughline is. You may think you know it, but discover halfway through your writing that it is in fact something different. It may be that you discover your throughline in your first write, or your first re-write - or your second, or third, or fourth. With a throughline, your memoir has a pulse, a heartbeat. Without it, it’s a series of anecdotes.

This week, we will explore great memoirs of the last 100 years, not as a model for how you should write your memoir, but as a laboratory for understanding what makes memoirs compelling to readers. We will put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), inside and outside of class. And we will share with our fellow travelers our progress on our solitary journeys of memoir. We will examine what it means to “show and tell” in writing our stories, and how to weave our own thoughts about these stories into the stories themselves. We will each strive to discover and recognize our unique VOICE. We will experiment with the sense-memory of setting, action and character as we bring the reader into the world we re-create on the pages of our memoirs.
Coleman is a Texas and Oklahoma native who came to Wisconsin by way of New York and Chicago. He had an adventurous career as a rebel, a nightclub manager, a chef, an international travel industry poobah, and a software mini-mogul. Coleman studied theatre at Cornell University, education at the University of Michigan, and finance and human resources at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

He is the author of a memoir (Spoke) a collection of plays (Faux Poe) and a novel (Kidnapping Henry Kissinger). He received a Literary Artist Fellowship from the Wisconsin Arts Council and is a 3-time recipient of an artist-community collaboration grant from the Wisconsin Arts Council. His memoir was named winner of the 2014 International Book Award for autobiography/memoir. He is a member of the Dramatist Guild of America and Playwrights Ink in Madison.

Pre-reading: It is recommended that each participant read at least one (and hopefully more) of the following memoirs:

- Albright, Madeline – *Prague Winter*
- Angelou, Maya – *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
- Arenas, Reynaldo – *Before Night Falls*
- Baldwin, James – *Notes of a Native Son*
- Black Elk – *Black Elk Speaks*
- Coleman – *SPOKE: A Mother, A Son, Civil Rights, Vietnam*
- Conroy, Frank – *Stop-Time*
- Day, Dorothy – *The Long Loneliness*
- Eggers, Dave – *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*
- Gilbert, Elizabeth – *Eat, Pray, Love*
- Keller, Helen – *The Story of My Life*
- Krakauer, John – *Into Thin Air*
- Mandela, Nelson – *Conversations with Myself*
- Merton, Thomas – *The Seven Story Mountain*
- Thompson, Hunter S. – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*
- Trussoni, Danielle, *Falling Through The Earth*
- Wiesel, Elie – *Night*
- Wolfe, Tom – *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*
- Wright, Richard – *American Hunger*

Note: You may substitute other memoirs you deem worthy.

Pre-assignment: *Deadline – June 1*

Email to the instructor (coleman@spokesinthewheel.com) any ten pages (or so) of your draft memoir. They may be the beginning ten pages, or the end, or whatever you
feel is representative of your best work. If you aren’t that far along, send up to ten pages of a true incident or period of your life.

Manuscripts should be 12 point type, double spaced. They should preferably be in a .doc or .docx format to enable comments by the instructor. Make sure your name is on the first page of the submission. Note: your submissions will be shared with your classmates.

Monday – The Memoir

- Assignment due on Monday (bring it to class with you): Memoir

  Pick one memoir (from the above list or from your own reading) which you especially like. Write no more than one succinct page detailing what made this memoir compelling for you. If there is something about the memoir that you disliked, write no more than one paragraph describing what disturbed you.

- Housekeeping
  - Assignments
  - Our pledge to each other
- What makes a memoir great?
- Laying one’s soul bare
- Anecdotes vs. Story
- Critiques
- Review assignment for Tuesday

Tuesday – STORY in memoir

- Assignment due on Tuesday: Writing Through the Pain

  Focus on a challenging experience or time in your life. It may be heartbreaking. It may be humorous. It may be both. It may be ironic or inspiring or revealing. In four pages (or less), write the story of this event. Show the reader who was there, where the event occurred and exactly what happened and how. For this exercise, try to leave commentary off the page. Just write the story of what happened.

- What is STORY?
  - The arc of a memoir
  - Do you need a hook?
  - Beginning, middle, end
  - The inciting incident
  - Scenes and acts / Chapters and Books
    - Must a scene begin at the beginning?
  - Conflict, climax and resolution
  - An awakening of spirit / a resolution of conflict / an understanding
• Truth
  o Is truth possible in memoir?
  o Is truth important?
  o Memory v Facts
    ▪ Research and Memoirs
    ▪ Footnotes? References? Bibliography?
  o Does the memoirist have an obligation to tell the truth as she believes it?
  o Truth and Family
  o Truth and Liability
• Critiques
• Review assignment for Wednesday

Wednesday – The Craft of Writing

• Assignment due on Wednesday: What If?
  Recall a critical incident, one which changed the trajectory of your life or of others. Now imagine that this incident had an entirely different conclusion. For example, suppose the baby had been resuscitated or the fire successfully put out or the crime solved or the election won or the prayer answered or the invention worked. Now write the story of your incident with this new twist. Again, try for four (or fewer) pages.

• Show and Tell (and muse)
  o Show – the close-up
  o Tell – the long-shot
  o Muse – your feelings
• Feelings v Facts
• Plots and subplots
• Exploiting the senses with sense memory
  o Use all five senses
  o Make it visceral
  o Inhabit your scene
• Critiques
• Review assignment for Thursday

Thursday – The Craft of Writing, cont.

• Assignment due on Thursday: Sense Memory
  Recall an impactful event or time in your life. Focus on an object that was present (a doll, a pet, a chair, a tree, a chain, a bell, a food). Close your eyes and relive your experience of that object. Use it as the portal to the event itself. Hold it
in your hands. See it. Touch it. Feel it. Smell it. Hear it. Taste it. Now put your EVENT down on the page. (The object you have selected to help your sense memory may or may not ever be mentioned in your writing. It’s just a tool to take you back inside that moment.) Invite your reader into the scene by making the scene real and immediate. Avoid commentary, per se, but discover a way to share your feelings about the experience merely with your descriptions, and by what you include and exclude from your writing. Again – try for four pages.

- What is VOICE?
- WHO are you writing FOR?
- Writing Groups
- Parsing advice/criticism
- Critiques
- Review assignment for Friday

Friday – Last Thoughts

- Assignment for Friday: *Your Best Work*

Prior to the workshop starting, you submitted up to ten pages of what you considered to be your best work. Any time this week, you can substitute a different ten pages, and email them in .doc format to the instructor. They may be pages that you wrote this week, or you may have written them earlier.

You will have had an opportunity to read the work of your classmates. You may not have had time to read through all of their work – but read what you can, and come prepared to engage in a lively communal critique of your own and others’ works.

Post conference, you will receive a written critique from the instructor of your ten pages.

Final thoughts:

- Throughline
  - Discovering your throughline
  - Keeping your throughline authentic
  - Cutting what doesn’t belong
- On the value of incubation
- Learning to love re-writing
- Working with your editor
- Staying motivated
- What’s next?
Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.