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Memoir: An Introduction

G. Thomas Couser

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Each year brings a batch of new memoirs, ranging from works by former teachers and celebrity has-beens to disillusioned soldiers and bestselling novelists. In addition to becoming bestsellers in their own right, memoirs have become a popular object of inquiry in the academy and a mainstay in most M.F.A. workshops. Courses in what is now called "life writing" study memoir alongside personal essays, diaries, and autobiographies. Memoir: An Introduction proffers a succinct and comprehensive survey of the genre (and its many subgenres) while taking readers through the various techniques, themes, and debates that have come to characterize the ubiquitous literary form. Its fictional origins are traced to eighteenth-century British novels; its early American roots are examined in Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and colonial captivity narratives; and its ethical conundrums are considered via the imbroglios brought on by the questionable claims in Rigoberta Menchú's I, Rigoberta, and more notoriously, James Frey's A Million Little Pieces. Alongside these more traditional literary forms, Couser expands the discussion of memoir to include film with what he calls "documemoir" (exemplified in Nathaniel Kahn's My Architect) and graphic narratives like Art Spiegelman's Maus.

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