What Made *H Is for Hawk* by Helen MacDonald a Best-Selling Memoir?

Taught by Linda Joy Myers, PhD & Brooke Warner

SYLLABUS

Class 1. The Art of Blending
• The definition of experimental memoir and why *H Is for Hawk* qualifies.
• How to take liberties with point-of-view, and make it work.
• How Helen weaves a tapestry of themes, each one informing the other, and how to track this in your own work.
• Tracking the inner and outer worlds—and inviting your reader all the way in on both fronts.

Class 2. How to Handle Grief in Memoir
• The use of someone else's story (in Helen's case, T.H. White's) to make sense of your own.
• Universal vs. specific grief—why both matter.
• Tracking Helen's descent into grief to help you understand your own arc.
• The language of grief in metaphor and poetic descriptions that capture the reader, and help you, the writer, understand how language supports theme development.

Class 3. Using Language to Captivate and Wow Your Reader
• The power of imagery and metaphor to deepen descriptive passages.
• Crafting your description to fully envelope the reader in sensual details and help them lose themselves.
• What's in it for the reader? Universal messages in H Is for Hawk, and how to pay attention to them to become a better memoirist yourself.
• The power of showing vs. telling—complete with concrete examples.

Class 4. The Journey of Personal Transformation in Memoir
• How obsession about hawking, her father's history, the history of Britain, and White's story create an arc of the story.
• The ascension from grief, and how to help your reader track your emotional arc.
• Land and history as healing metaphors.
• The through-line of transformation across multiple characters (in Helens case, her own, Mabel's, her father's, and T.H. White's)

Class 1. The Art of Blending

Brooke Warner: Hi, everyone. Hi, Linda Joy.

Linda Joy Myers: Hi, Brooke. How are you?

BW: I'm well. Welcome to the first class of what made *H Is for Hawk* a bestselling memoir. Class number one is The Art of Blending. We welcome you.

LJM: We both love this book so much. It's great to be here with everybody.

BW: We really did. And it was interesting, wasn't it—in the free call, some of the feedback was that it was too literary or hard to get into and I understand that and in some ways can really see that. And I also think it kind of made me happy to know that a bestseller could be something that has such high literary merit that as a culture, we're not just saying, OK, it's only this fast and loose memoir that's popular—that something with such high literary merit would be really infiltrating the cultural consciousness. It's great.

LJM: I agree.

BW: We're going to re-introduce ourselves for the few of you who are new to us and don't know us. Hello.

LJM: Yeah, welcome to all of you. I'm Linda Joy Myers; I'm president of the National Association of Memoir Writers. I'm also the author of the memoir *Don't Call Me Mother: A Daughter's Journey from Abandonment to Forgiveness*; *The Power of Memoir: How to Write Your Healing Story*; and *Journey of Memoir*. Brooke?

BW: I'm Brooke Warner. I'm the publisher of She Writes Press and the president of Warner Coaching, which is my coaching practice where I coach writers to publication. I'm the author of *What's Your Book?* and *How to Sell Your Memoir*. I'm working on a new book called *Green-Light Your Book* which will be out next year, and then Linda Joy and I just this month have released *Breaking Ground on Your Memoir* in paperback. Prior to now it's just been an e-book, so we're excited that that is out in the world. Anything that you want to say, Linda, before I dive into talking?

LJM: No, I think it's great that we're talking about an experimental memoir because I don't think it's as known as a way that one can write. I think that's what we have on our hands here, so jump in.

BW: It is interesting and experimental. Linda Joy is going to spend a whole section talking about point of view. Point of view is one of the reasons that it qualifies in my mind as experimental. For those of you who don't know, I come out of a publishing background. I was an acquisitions editor and later an executive editor at Seal Press, where pretty much 90 percent of the books that we did were memoirs. That's where my memoir experience comes from. I look at this in the

context of traditional book publishing. Book publishers get really excited about things that are experimental when they're unique and original and done well, and they get really disdainful of experimental stuff when they are confusing and odd. What is the difference and how did Helen Macdonald manage to do this really interesting, experimental memoir? That is what I'd like to focus on, and then also just touch upon—for the sake of prefacing what Linda Joy is going to talk about—what it means to get into someone else's point of view and why, typically, this is disallowed. What Helen has done is gotten into T.H. White's point of view. She absolutely reimagines his history—and again, I'm not going to get into this too much because Linda Joy is going to give a bunch of examples and show you how she does this. She does it in such a way as to inform her own story, and that's what's important. It's not for no reason—it has a very specific purpose. It is well-done and it's also thematic. Because what she's doing, basically, is she's tracking her own emotional journey and using T.H. White's emotional journey to mirror hers. That is something that she has used as a very strong construct and it's also something that she's done very masterfully. It's not only her writing. Her writing is very masterful, but what is more important to me in a lot of ways is how well-thought out the book is and how she uses all of these different pieces to create a seamless hole. That in itself is not particularly experimental, but it has this experimental flavor to it because it's kind of like nothing you've ever seen before. The reason that it is so unique and different from other memoirs is, yes, most definitely because she goes into another person's point of view, for which she did a lot of research and read everything that White ever published. But there are other elements to it as well. Her descriptions and her use of metaphor and so many other weavings that she does—we're going to be talking about weaving themes here tonight—is done in, I would argue, a very precise way. And then she also is—it's a bit like a tapestry. But at the same time, it follows a very tight arc, which I talked about in the free call. The arc of the memoir is really the descent into grief and then the eventual pulling out of it. I want to just also touch upon some other examples of experimental memoirs just to talk about the fact that these do exist and what they are in the culture. They're usually either about point of view—which is, up until now, quite unusual. But obviously, Helen Macdonald has done it by going into T.H. White's point of view. There's another book that Linda Joy and I talk about in our courses sometimes called *A Family Romance* by John Lanchester. I'll put these in the chat window. Would you mind doing that for me, Linda Joy, actually, while I'm talking?

LJM: Sure.

BW: In this book, he gets into the point of view of his family members. Another experimental memoir which is kind of a novel is *Half Broke Horses* by Jeannette Walls, who wrote *The Glass Castle*. That one is technically a novel, but it uses elements of memoir and I think—I'm just going to put this out there tonight, to say that I think this is something we're going to be seeing more of. I think Helen Macdonald is at the sort of trending curve of this idea about blending fact and fiction and still calling it a memoir or vice versa. You've always heard that a novel is based on a true story, and Linda Joy and I have always been very explicit that you're not allowed to go into other people's points of view. But then along comes someone like Helen and she totally blows that out of the water, but it's because of how she treated it and it's done so well that it's "allowed." I'm going to mention *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey even though it's a controversial memoir because in a lot of ways it was deemed to be untrue due to the fact that he lied about some of the details. But the book in itself is an interesting read for people who are

interested in experimental memoir because of how the story is told. It's done in almost a staccato kind of style, and if any of you have ever read the novel *Requiem for a Dream*, it reminded me a little bit of that in terms of the storyteller. That is a great example of experimental memoir in voice. It doesn't only have to be in structure or in point of view; there are lots of interesting ways to handle experimental in terms of the narration and the persona that you want to bring to the page. I want to mention a couple of books that I think are interesting in terms of experimental in structure. One is called *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*—that's kind of an old book—and then a book that I worked on at Seal Press called *Purge*. Both of these books are experimental in the sense that they are using a lot of short chapters—almost vignette style chapters—with no chapter headings. The experience of being in these memoirs is sort of like watching a montage or it has this different feeling, more of like a tapestry. I bring these up because I think that a lot of people think that the way to do memoir is just to do a linear memoir, point A to point B. Certainly there are people who are more sophisticated who think that doing a linear memoir in that way is the only way not to do memoir. They're going to think of something more clever and they're going to come up with this complex structure. But at the end of the day, if you want to do something creative and unique, of course it has to work. The question is, then, how do you figure out if it's working? I think number one is to get readers to read the work. Number two is that you really need to consult with someone who has some sense of the industry or who is a broad reader and basically can say, yes, this actually makes sense and you can do this and it's a cool idea. So if you are a person who is like, wow, this is really interesting and I want to try some of these things, I say go for it and see how it reads and see if you can feel into it intuitively. If it feels odd or if you start to share it with readers and they're like, actually, yes, we concur that kind of feels off, listen to that feedback. I do think it's a point of celebration, actually, that Helen has done this interesting thing and I think she may pave the way for others. But if you want to try point of view in your own memoir, we definitely encourage you to give it a try and see what that feels like to enter into point of view, but most of you are probably going to limit experimenting in other people's points of view to family members. I would argue for like a mother or a father or someone whose story you know really well, because most of you aren't going to do the kind of research that Helen did on T.H. White that she talks about at the end of the book. In fact, the postscript of this book is about how she goes and is going to do some more research on T.H. White and then she basically lets herself off the hook, which I was like, good for you—you don't need to do any more. You're done. It's a great example of how to do point of view well, and Linda Joy is going to talk specifics.

LJM: I'm just going to give the overview first. She weaves T.H. White's story throughout the book—I'm going to track a little bit of that with you—as a parallel theme. So it's woven into sometimes separate chapters, sometimes woven in a dreamlike way, into her own experience with Mabel the hawk in the now moment. And then she goes back and forth into thoughts—it's a very dreamy book too, in a way. When I was looking for certain moments to grab it's like a little hard to choose which one because, for one thing, the writing is so amazing throughout there, and I feel slightly hypnotized when I read it. But she plants the seeds about T.H. White's story and then pulls them all the way through. Some of you have been in our classes before and we talk about something called through threads. I'll give you some examples of that in a moment. Then, using the first and third person for White and herself—actually, I should have said point of view, because we're in White's point of view—I don't know that she says "I" for him—but we feel like he's talking and we feel like we are looking through his eyes. And then herself, she's an "I"

and then she stands back and looks at herself as a "she" or "when I was a child, this is what my father saw of me." I'll show you examples of that. And then there's this mythology that builds up all the way through and we're even in the point of view of the hawks at times and we're in the point of view of more in the body or the experience of Mabel and Gos as well as White and herself. So as you can see, this isn't normally the way memoirs are written, but it does open the door for us to think about how to be creative with it. She first starts weaving her—we talked about obsession in our free webinar, but I do want to mention it again. She begins talking about the obsession she had with birds when she was—on page 26 and 27, where she also introduces *The Goshawk* by T.H. White, which is a book that she had as a child. She talks about the obsession and she's very specific: "When I was six, I tried to sleep every night with my arms folded behind my back like wings. This didn't last long because it is very hard to sleep with your arms folded behind your back like wings." And then she tracks her obsession through reading about Horus the Egyptian god. She starts doing research about hawks and specific names, and then on page 28—I'll talk about it again later, but on page 28 she brings in all these historical books. One thing I want to tell you is that as you're tracking her obsession and White's story, she uses specifics all the way through. She's naming things. She's talking about specific books. She's teaching history, which we also are going to be talking about in this course. On page 29, she talks about being—"It's 1979 and I'm an eight-year-old girl in a book shop. I'm standing under a skylight with a paperback in my hand and I am puzzled." So she is reading about *The Goshawk*—now she's just eight and she's reading a summary about it. She is completely captivated, so for the next three pages you hear about how captivated she is and very specific—we immediately start getting to know the goshawk that White trained called Gos. She says on page 31, "The hawk was real to me and I revered it"—in the book—"Gos was real to me. Gos had steely pinions and a mad marigold eye and hopped and flew and mantled his great wings over a feast of raw liver. He cheeped like a songbird and was terrified of cars. I liked Gos." So what you get there—you just don't have, oh gosh, I was fascinated with this hawk and T.H. White's book. She's very specific about what's characterizing Gos—which I think is amazingly well-done—and then she weaves more. She settles you down into the fact that you are going to be spending time with White and with herself. By page 33 she's saying, "it's the book of a young man that was written before his other works." So for those of you who haven't read the book, he wrote *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Once and Future King* and was very famous for that. She does talk about those books too. So she sets this all up and then she creates a chapter called "Mr. White" in which his point of view is there completely. "He thinks he will leave school. School life is unreal. This is unreal. He has had enough. He has to get out." Notice the staccato sentences. She knows so much about him—she puts in his history in school and she even gives an overview of his whole life by the next page and comes back and weaves in his relationship to Gos and she analyzes him through Freud and brings in history. She's just really doing a lot with this. All the way through the book—and there are many places, but I have another brief example of the point of view here. She is training Mabel—her hawk that she has—she's a young hawk. And then she teaches her how to hunt and how to eat. The whole thing is about teaching a hawk how to hunt. "A hawk balances evenly on the balls of her feet, mesmerized by the flickering screen of the TV. Tiny white wisps of down still attached to the finials of her scapular feathers wave in the draft from the hall. And then she bursts from my fist and papers fly." And then she has this very detailed paragraph about what the hawk does and what she does in reaction, all the way through weaving what Gos and Mabel are about, what they're like, what they look like. We are like with them—we have a sympathy, let's say, to the point of view and the experience in the

world of Gos and Mabel, which is bizarre. This is this dreamlike thing. She talks about what she's been doing and what White has been doing with Gos on page 91, and then she creates this sympathy for him—for the hawk. "Poor Gos. Ragged, fearful, broken-feathered. I often thought of him as I sat with my hawk. I saw him in black and white and a long way off, as if viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, a miniature miserable hawk twittering in distress on the gray lawns of a distant house. Gos was very real to me." She doesn't just say, "Gos was real to me," she shows it to you. All this gets us woven from the very beginning—from finding out about her obsession. All the way through the book, it's like she's knitting. She has the threads of White's story, her own struggle to recover from her father's death, and to train this hawk, which she throws herself into obsessively as you find out—into this also dreamy reflection, and later we're going to talk about history and other themes that do come in even early on in the book. Anything you want to add?

BW: It is very fascinating to think about the ways in which you have this empathy for these animals and then also, simultaneously, how she really becomes one with her hawk. It's great. I'm going to be talking about how Helen weaves a tapestry of themes, each one informing the other, and then also talking about how to do it yourself. Helen's themes are many, and they are interconnected. I listed some of them here: grief and feeling trapped in it, escape, setting oneself free, hatred, wildness and becoming feral—I did put these words in quotation marks. "Free" because, of course, she's not free and there's this sort of parallel between her and Mabel as free or not free. Same with "feral"—she also talks about T.H. White as feral, foxy. It's an interesting way that she also connects the two of them. And obsession, madness, healing, and then coming back to oneself. That does more or less track her arc, in a sense, as well. The way that she does this is really simply to remember to talk about these things. Linda Joy mentioned the through threads earlier, and when you have a through thread it's something that is recurring. I always like to use the image of thread or weaving or tapestry—I'm almost always using these words to talk about the way that this is done in memoir because one of the examples that I talk about is as if it were a loom—something that you were making a rug on—and you want the different colors to show up in some sort of consistent pattern. So your themes are the same way. You're not going to start a rug that has some detail of yellow, for instance, and just do it one-third of the way up and then completely abandon that color for the rest of the two-thirds of the rug, or it would look a little bit weird. Some memoirs feel that way. They feel like a person just abandoned something really important that was happening in the beginning and then they don't follow it through. The issue, of course, in the beginning is to identify what your themes are. If you don't know what they are in the beginning, that's OK, but as you start to work your way through, if you don't know what they are still it becomes problematic because you of course can lose track of them if you don't know what they are. Helen's are many—and there are lots of examples of memoirists who have many themes. Frank McCourt, who wrote *Angela's Ashes*, is another one. He had a lot of themes going on—interconnected, woven, on top of one another. And Helen's have an intensity to them. You're reading along and you're sort of like, jeez, that's happening because she is freaking out right now. And a lot of this is just about being consumed by grief to the point of making yourself an outsider. She talks a lot about isolation—the ways in which her feelings were just totally out of control. She also says on page 27—I thought that this was very interesting, at the top of the page—she says, "I was interested in my emotions now." This is actually talking specifically about T.H. White's goshawk, but I still think this is an interesting thing that she writes: "I was interested in my emotions now. I thought about the book cautiously,

ran my feelings over it the way you might feel for a hurting tooth with your tongue." So what she's saying is she was speaking to her feelings and just what she's going through. I shared this one on the free call but I'm going to share it again tonight. When she goes to pick up Mabel on page 46, she opens the chapter—chapter five—by saying, "When you are broken, you run. But you don't always run away. Sometimes, helplessly, you run toward." I love this because it speaks to a very unique brand of escaping. Helen truly is escaping or trying to escape from her life in this book. Her father dies and she just wants out, and the way that she is going to opt out is by doing this very specific thing of training this hawk. And then inadvertently, she becomes merged with the hawk and obsessed with the hawk and so much so that she becomes feral and wild and obsessed and mad. But one of the things that starts happening is in her isolation and in her antisocial behavior, she has a lot of moments of feeling hate. I don't know if you guys realized that, but it was very apparent to me. All these different scenes where she's talking about how much she hates everyone. One of them is with the runner on page 100. At the bottom of page 100, and they're out and about on a regular street with all kinds of cyclists and runners and it says, "A bicycle hisses by. The hawk bates. I curse. Another bicycle. She bates again. My nerve breaks. I start to run back to the house. We are nearly at the door when a runner passes. He's coming up silently behind us on his expensive trainers and the hawk bates once again. I hate him for upsetting my hawk. Actually hate him—am outraged by his existence. All of the anger within me—the anger I did not know was there, the anger the books call 'one of the five stages of grief' rears up in a towering instant of white hot fury. I look at his retreating back and wish him death." I just think it's quite beautiful, actually, how she talks about hate. All of us feel that crazy rage for things that are not really directed at someone but then someone becomes the object of our hate. You feel it when you're mad on the freeway and in lots of different instances. There's a way of dehumanizing this person that she captures so beautifully, and part of the reason that she's feeling this way and doing this is because she's noticing her own antisocial behavior and separation from human beings as she becomes a hawk. She says on page 117, right before the line break, "I was training the hawk to make it all disappear." She's never really losing sight of any of these themes and there is moment after moment after moment—you could track it, and I did. I underlined so many points of this book because there are these things that she just keeps going back to about wildness and being free and feral and lots, again, about anger and rage, which is really stemming from her grief, and it's fairly obvious. It makes it more intense. And because Mabel herself is this wild hawk who is primal and just has all of these intense, crazy emotions, she is really able to embody those things as well. Another place where she talks about her anger is on page 142. It says, "Blind, cold, shaking fury. I felt it rise. I hated that woman. I wanted to burst into the bank, scream at her, pick up that tangled ball that was a skylark and take it home." You can read this whole scene for yourself, but again, there's hatred and fury and she's really—this sort of precedes the obsession, or overlaps with the obsession. And then eventually to the point where she really feels that she's crazy. And then finally she pulls out of it. That's what I would recommend all of you be looking at as you're thinking about your themes and just take a pencil or a highlighter and if you take these notes that I have—grief and feeling trapped and escape, setting oneself free, hatred—you could probably come up with some of your own as well. In fact, if you want to share some of the things in the chat window that you think I might have lost or not picked up on, by all means tell me what you think they are. This is not a list that is the definitive list. These are just things that I saw as I was reading. When you're thinking about your own theme, in the beginning if you've written a few scenes you can start to go, OK, what do these all have in common? Overarchingly, what is it that I'm trying to achieve? And

then you begin to map your own themes. I think it's also very important—for instance, let's say that Helen knew that she was going to do grief and escape and hatred and wildness and all of these different things. You can just put these single words up in your writing space in a visible place so that as you're writing your own work, you ask yourself, am I coming back to this theme? Am I remembering to talk about the things that I say this book is about? Again, inadvertently of course, people get off on tangents, they lose track of their themes, they lose track of their through threads—it takes incredible concentration and discipline to stay really tight with your themes. I would argue that Helen's book is very tightly woven and it's part of what I love about it—I was waxing poetic last week about the arc and everything, because the arc is really quite astounding. I don't think I've seen a memoir with such a rise and a fall with so much intensity of emotion. Her clear paying attention to it and also her self-awareness about talking about getting into hatred and obsession and madness, all of which are very unattractive qualities in people—and yet she does it in such a way that you're right there with her and you empathize and you start to feel that she is otherworldly, until she finally snaps back and then starts to come back to humanity. It's quite fascinating. Tracking your own threads, again, is a discipline—it's something that you want to be very overt and conscientious and write them down and place them someplace visible so that it's not like you just go, oh, I forgot. It's that you get into the writing and you can't see the forest through the trees anymore. It's very common, so you find ways to support yourself to remember how to keep it all present.

LJM: It's a lot of note taking and a lot of tracking of your own themes, especially when you're first starting.

BW: Absolutely. And then maybe you pare some down or certain ones of them become more meaningful and therefore they get more priority as you start to figure out what your story is.

LJM: As you're writing it, sometimes, it also gets clearer. So the inner and outer worlds—a memoir is a story that weaves the inner and the outer worlds of you—of your life and about your theme. I think it's helpful to think about what is the inner world arc that I'm going to be tracking. Many of you know that when you get started, well I started here and I was struggling with my divorce, let's say, and I wasn't sure I could be on my own and then I went from bad to worse because I found out I couldn't be alone anymore and then went back and that didn't work and so I had to come back out. So one of the ways you'd have to weave a story like that would be the world of your thoughts and your feelings, maybe moments when you're alone or your dreams or something that's more inner, and then outer-oriented scenes where we see you in the world in a certain way or interacting or talking to someone or being lonely, but we see it more in a scene. A lot of early memoirists really stay in the head maybe too much, sometimes, but we have to be to some degree. Part of what we do in a memoir is we take a reader on the inner journey of who we were, or who we are and who we were. Helen does this in so many different ways. She takes us on a journey about herself but she also takes us on a journey with White as we have said. I've already mentioned that early in the book, she sees her interest in the hawks and White as a child and I read you some of that, but I wanted to talk a little bit more about how she used language in a scene from earlier in her life where she met a hawk. This is on page 18. She was dreaming of hawks and she starts analyzing—she analyzes a lot of words—this is where the literary part comes in. Right here she analyzes the word raptor, meaning "bird of prey" from the Latin "raptor" meaning "robber," which means seize. She's thinking about when she worked at a bird

of prey center. She's been into this whole bird thing and this hawk and falconry thing for a really long time. She's describing this hawk that they rescued—it was a wild goshawk who had never been born in captivity or anything. I just want to read a little bit about the language that she used because it's very specific. I think it shows an example of something that is not her—that is outside of her and yet you feel the inside of Helen's fascination. So it's a perfect integration of inner and outer. "She's an old female goshawk. Old because her feet were gnarled and dusty, her eyes a deep, fiery orange, and she was beautiful. Beautiful like a granite cliff or a thunder cloud. She completely filled the room. She had a massive back of sun-bleached gray feathers and as muscled as a pit bull and intimidating as hell. So wild and spooky and reptilian. Carefully, we fanned her great, broad wings as she snaked her head around to stare at us, unblinking. We ran our fingers along the narrow bones of her wings, along bones light as pipes, hollow, each one with cantilevered internal struts of bone like the inside of an airplane wing." And she goes on just a little bit longer there. I don't know about you, but I'm in the room with this hawk, completely fascinated by it. As most of us, I didn't know anything about hawks and I wouldn't have thought I'd be interested. I've told friends about this book and they're like, "Eh, I'm not interested in hawks." I said, "It's so much more than that." But she also starts weaving in the history in general in here, which I'm now going to talk more about. She says, "This goshawk was bigger than me and more important and much, much older. A dinosaur pulled from the forest. There was a distinct prehistoric scent to her feathers and it caught my nose, peppery, rusty as storm rain." She brings in the idea of a reptilian and dinosaur primitiveness there and also this hawk was found in the landscape of England, so one of the things that she goes into is a lot of history of England and a lot of different landscapes. I'm quite fascinated with—I read a lot about England; I've been to England a few times. I haven't explored it nearly enough, but one of the things that interested me was World War II. On page six, very early, she starts bringing in kind of a mystical attitude about the history of the land itself, which is another theme. So she's near this pond: "The pond was a bomb crater, one of a line dropped by a German bomber over Lakenheath in the war. It was a pond in dunes, surrounded by tussocks of sand sedge, miles and miles from the sea. There are great tracts of reindeer moss, tiny scars and florets. The stuff is like a patch of the artic fallen into the world in the wrong place. Everywhere there are bony shoulders and blades of flint. You can pick up shards knocked from flint cores by Neolithic craftsmen." So she brings in the Neolithic age and then she moves to 1688 and what happened to the land then: "The broken ground was raised to the sky." And then she talks about when the wind stopped and what happened then and she brings in other books. She says, "It feels dangerous and half-buried and damaged. I love it because of all the places I know in England, it feels to me the wildest." Whether you wanted to know all that about England or not, suddenly you're kind of sucked in to the appreciation this English woman has for her own country and the very land and the sand and the history that she's walking on, which I loved and I found quite fascinating. Another place where she brings that in is on page 158. She's talking about—it's the chapter called "Heat." She brings in history here again—she does it in many different places, but I kind of skipped around. She's reading about how the Earth is changing. She says, "There's an unprecedented summer melt in the Artic. The Northwest Passage is open. Permafrost is melting. Ecosystems failing. Horrible news. Wildly important, but I can't concentrate on the paper." She's talking more then—she talks about Weimar Berlin and she's talking about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War and other things that she brings in that are sort of part of destiny, part of the inevitability of history and how it affects us. So she has these philosophical ramblings that she brings in, but I don't know about you—I never was lost in it. I was always amazed, like how I

ended up thinking about melting permafrost and the fall of the Berlin Wall. How did we get here? Also, White—she's reading about him and he lived in the '30s before World War II. So he is of another era. She's talking about his life at that time and she says, "There was another terror." She talks about his sort of neurotic fears and he had a lot of stuff going on psychologically—she brings in the psychology of Freud as another layer. She says, "There was a new fear. It was war. Everyone felt it drawing closer. We are in the shadow of a great fear." And then she starts talking about the angel of death and how he is lost and at loose ends and what does he do to try to pull himself together—he starts dreaming about and writing about hawks and other mythological stories of which *The Sword in the Stone* is very well known. So then she weaves the inner and outer world of herself and her father and White, as I've mentioned, and the imagined world of the hawk. I'm going to give some examples of that.

BW: And we'll have Q&A after.

LJM: Right. She's talking about dreaming about her father, so she goes in and out of these dreams. I thought this was a very—again, it's an inner experience that is describing also her relationship with her father.

BW: What page is this, Linda?

LJM: It's page 62, at the bottom of that page and then it goes up to the next page. "It wasn't the usual dream of a family reunited. In the dream, I'm searching for something in a house—an empty house where there are pale squares on the walls where the pictures should be. I open an upstairs room and it's not like the others. The far wall is gone. No wall, just air, falling into the pale violet of the city evening. Below me is a bomb site. Tons of bricks and rubble and rose bay willow herb blooming in drifts between broken rafters and spars that are ruinous fears and the shadows between these things are thickening tonight, but they are not what I'm looking for. Because standing on top of the tallest pile of bricks is a small boy with sandy hair. His face is turned away, but I recognize him immediately, not just because he's wearing the same short trousers and lumpy gray jacket in a photograph in our album. It's my father. And then I know where I am. This is Shepherd's Bush where he'd run as a boy. He'd clamber over bomb sites and collect things. We used to bomb bricks and bombs made of bricks. There wasn't much else to play with. And then the boy looks at me," and she goes on just a little bit more, but she brings in his history during World War II into this story in her dream and her love of him and how did he—he was a photographer and so she tracks throughout the book. She even has sections where she's talking about him and his photography and what he took pictures of and what he taught her, and one of the things that becomes a takeaway later on is he taught her patience. In all of these classes we're going to be going through all of this more, but she establishes things early on that then become these threads all the way through. I don't know how she did it, really. I'd love to hear more about how she wrote this.

BW: It would be interesting to see what her process is and we might be able to see—the interesting thing is that we've never taught a book that is currently on the bestseller list. We've always had tons and tons of interview information to pull from. So I think that as Helen—she is well-known, but I think this book is just going to be the next big thing.

LJM: I think so too.

BW: We are moving into Q&A and we already have a few questions, so that is fantastic. I put the next class information here just because we always like to remind you what's coming next week. There was a question asking whether we thought that this book is considered a hybrid. I definitely would say no. I guess no in that it's absolutely a memoir and it's categorized as a memoir, but on the other hand, I guess I might say yes in the sense that clearly she's doing some really interesting things with this book and if you look at the flap—actually, the cover blurb is interesting from *The Economist*. It says, "One part memoir, one part gorgeous evocation of the natural world, and one part literary meditation." Clearly people are reading things into this, but on the other hand, I know that it's being sold as a memoir. Interestingly, on the barcode, the category is nature. Go figure. Publishers opt for very interesting—again, having worked in publishing, a lot of times publishers will try to distance themselves from memoir as a category because of this love/hate relationship that it has with memoir. Who knows, Carol. Maybe you have more insight into the whole thing than we do. Jean is asking if we could enumerate what we think her major themes are. What are the words on her wall? What brought her back to the threads of her tapestry? I'm going to go back to the slide that I had, Jean. I don't know if you can see this, but these are the ones that I think they are: grief, escape, the idea of freedom—hatred is not a theme, in my opinion, it just is there—wildness, oppression, healing.

LJM: Mythology, in a way. The mythology of hawks, the mythology of the history of hawking—that seems to be one of them.

BW: And nature.

LJM: Yes, nature, absolutely.

BW: Which is the category of the book, apparently.

LJM: And history.

BW: Cathy is asking, "What about the concept of dropping the reader immediately into the story? I didn't feel any interest in the story until the last line of the first chapter." Let's go look and see what that is. It's on page 11. It says, "Three weeks later, it was the reindeer moss I was looking at when my mother called and told me my father was dead." That's the moment when you know what the book is about.

LJM: She has three or four pages before that, but she sets up the landscape, she sets up the history, and she sets up a little bit about looking for a hawk even then. She says, "You might spend a week in a forest full of gosses and never see one." She's talking about how hard it is to find them before she gets to the end of the chapter and finds out that her father died. It's subtle.

BW: Some books take a lot longer than that to get into, though. It's not too bad that it's page 11, but then you contrast it with something like *Wild* which has such an amazing, right in the moment boom. It's fascinating to me because *Wild* was conceived as a much more commercial book. Whether or not they knew it was going to be a bestseller, of course, is a different question,

but it was definitely commercial. From the boot on the front to the word "wild." *H Is for Hawk* and what this book is, it has a literary feeling to it. It's just very different.

LJM: And I've heard—I think it was an interview and I think someone at a local bookstore said this—but Helen was completely shocked that the book has sold this well. They did not expect it. She didn't write it thinking that's what would happen. She just wrote what she wanted to write.

BW: Which is great—I think that's wonderful. Carol is asking, "What are the thoughts about putting photos in memoirs?" Would you have liked to have seen photos of Mabel in here, Carol? That's an interesting observation. I think—people do it all the time.

LJM: You can be that literal or you can be more—she paints pictures of Mabel with words. I'd rather not see a photo of Mabel, frankly. I like the woodcut. I think it's possible that Helen did the woodcut. Where did I read that? I'm not sure—she does woodcuts, though. Anyway, everybody has their own—you sort of think about, OK, is the poetry of something more important than its literalness? So a photograph will be literal; a work of art will be less literal, but it's still an image. Or are we supposed to paint Mabel in our own heads? And is that the point? She has Gos in her head—she's never seen a picture of this hawk. So I think one of her points is that I am creating a world for you with words—that also makes it literary—and here is the painting I'm doing. There are many places where she describes Mabel in gigantic detail. I feel like I'm in the room with her. So it just—in terms of your own memoir, if you want to put photos in I don't think there's any rule against it.

BW: No, and usually it's the author who is prompting it because they want that for some reason. That's a good question. Rachel is asking about tense: "Helen skips around in tense often, starting in the past tense, switching to the present when Mabel is taken out of the box, and then she jumps around quite a bit." This is a question that came up via e-mail last week as well, and I think we need to integrate it into the class as a whole section. I feel like it would be important to track it a little bit better and to give some more attention to it. So I'll make a note of that. She absolutely does that and it's not an easy thing to do, nor do you want to do it—in a particular chapter, typically the way that that's handled is that you would wait until a section is over and then like have a line break and then move back into present or past. I think we should analyze that a little bit and add it to syllabus. Are you good with that, Linda?

LJM: Yeah, in class three we talk a lot about craft, so we could put it in there.

BW: I'll make a note to do that. So be at class three, Rachel. We'll do it justice.

LJM: She does it a lot with that, and there's a lot to learn about different uses of tenses. The thing that Brooke and I are always teaching is don't do it unless it's extremely structured. The reason we do that—unless people are very experienced writers—is because usually people get confused, get lost, and do it incorrectly so that everyone gets lost. The reader gets lost, you get lost, everybody is lost. But you can do it, and we will talk much more about that. I think it's a good topic.

BW: If you're a person who does not notice when you're moving around in tenses and you've gotten feedback from readers that you do it and you're like, oh, that's interesting, I didn't notice, then do not attempt to switch tenses in your memoir. If you're a person who's hyper-aware and you know and you're very intentional and you're really driving that, then you can absolutely do it. But these people who are doing tense-switching—like Helen and Frank McCourt—are masterful. Again, they know exactly what they're doing and why. I'm always giving feedback to students like, your tenses are all over the place, and then they'll go, oh, I didn't notice I was doing it. This is a note. Jean, you're asking about the Kindle version and whether we can track on the Kindle. The problem is no, because Linda and I have marked up our paperbacks—or rather hardcovers—and so that's what we're working with. I'm sorry about that. But we could try to do a little better job of telling you what chapter it's in.

LJM: Yeah, we can do that.

BW: We'll do that for next week. And Rachel looked up and found that it's Chris Wormell who did the cover image, so thank you for that.

LJM: Thank you. Oh, great.

BW: Any other questions coming up? We have time for maybe one or two short ones. Rachel is telling us that she has the paperback and the page numbers are the same, so that's actually super interesting. I didn't even know the paperback was out yet.

LJM: It's out in England and you can get it on Amazon, but it's not out in America yet, I don't think. Last I looked it wasn't, but that was a couple of months ago.

BW: It's fascinating from a publishing perspective just what this book is doing right now in that it's selling like it is in hardcover. It's pretty unprecedented, actually. Oh, and Rachel lives in Australia. That's why she has the paperback copy.

LJM: It was originally published in England.

BW: Yeah. Andrea is asking why don't I think that anger is one of the themes. The reason is because I don't think that she's angry often enough. Anger seems to be one of the stages of grief which she specifically references in that piece that I read. It certainly is something that fuels her, but I think it's part of her wildness and part of her being feral and all of the emotional intensity of Mabel—Mabel is a hawk, obviously, but animals get angry in a different way than humans. They have access to just primal emotions that we humans tend to stuff, and particularly because she's British, she does this even more so. It's like proper and don't get out of control. So I actually think it's not a theme but something that she is tracking that she notices to talk to the reader about how she's dealing with her grief. It's part of a coping mechanism. And that's why hatred is the same. I put it in that list just because it occurred to me that it was very interesting, but hatred and anger—maybe those are the same in some ways—there are certain things that she's doing and acting out and basically, I think, she's noticing, 'Hmm, this is unusual for me and it's stemming from the grief.' But I love the way she writes about it. I have to say, I've felt that kind of anger and hatred rising up in myself sometimes and you almost feel embarrassed or

like it's so intense. It's a human emotion, but we don't have good expression for anger and so it's great how she writes about it. Finally, and then we'll end for tonight, Jean says, "Linda Joy listed history of the land as a theme, which I had missed." I think the things to note, Jean—and I said this when I was teaching the theme part—is that this is just a list of things that I came up with. If you asked me the question, well, what would you put on the bulletin board for her, these are the things that I would put up. But Linda might put up the history of England and she did. She said history and the land and other things. We're not authoritative here. I haven't gone and mapped out every single theme. And it's also up for debate. Like Andrea's question, is hatred a theme and is anger a theme? And I'm just saying no, I don't think so, but we're just talking about it. The thing is that this is not a science—it's literature. When you decide what you think your themes are, people might argue with you and go, well, that's not a theme, but if you think it is or if it's working in the sense that it makes sense for you as a theme, then that's all that really matters.

LJM: That brings up a great point in that just like with a painting, we interact with the work of art in different ways. Part of what the art is asking of each of us is that we figure out how we relate to it. So in a work like this, some of it you won't relate to and you'll go, who cares about that? And other parts you'll go, wow, that is fascinating. That is you interacting with the work of art. Have fun, because that's what we're reading for. And it's the same with a poem. Sometimes somebody will say, oh, that's a great poem, or don't you just love that poem? And you're like, eh. I don't understand what the heck the poem is about. But there's another piece of writing somewhere or a song and you're in it. You're into it. So that's the art of the art.

BW: And in these classes, you guys can tell us. We want to hear from you and hear you say, this is a theme I noticed and it's perfect. And actually, to Carol's point—she asked about nature—nature is definitely a theme and it's not on my list. We're presenting to you guys what we're seeing and you're going to see things that we don't see, so we welcome your expertise as well.

LJM: Absolutely.

BW: All right, everyone. Thank you. We will see you a week from tonight. Have a wonderful week. Goodnight, Linda Joy.

LJM: Goodnight. It was great having everybody here today. Thank you and see you next week. Happy reading.

Class 2. How to Handle Grief in Memoir

Brooke Warner: Hello, everyone. Hello, Linda Joy. How are you doing?

Linda Joy Myers: I'm great. Hi, everybody. Welcome back.

BW: Here we are, class two: How to Handle Grief in Memoir. I just want to say hi to everyone and remind you that the question panel is open and we welcome your comments and questions as we talk. We may address them depending on how big or relevant they are to the slide at hand and then we'll have a conversation afterward as well. We look forward to that. Without further ado, Linda Joy is going to start.

LJM: As you know, in this class we're learning about how to do things ourselves in our work, for instance how to handle grief in memoir. We're using Helen's book *H Is for Hawk* to look at how she did it. As you all know if you've looked at the book, it's an unusual book. It's a very fluid book in a lot of ways. A great amount of time in the book is very associative—it's almost like you're in kind of a dream. But we can look at exactly how she handles certain things and the first one we're going to look at right now is how she used the story of T.H. White and how he trained his own hawk called Gos and his story—who he was, the details of his life—she does a parallel between herself and White a great deal of the time. Some of that is what I track today. What she does is she tracks his childhood and his interest in Gos, but before she tracks him she's tracking her own and she establishes the groundwork for what she ends up doing in the whole book in a way that you don't even realize she's doing it, but by page seven she's talking about the history of goshawks. This is before you find out her father died. She puts in some history on those pages and she talks about kind of the mystique of the landscape and she's talking about people in 1618 writing about all the different ways that there are goshawks in England. And then she does a little bit of a history of the British falconers' club. Now, all that which you don't know then leads up to meeting White and hearing about him. But she sees this other, bigger history first. She's of course, as you can see, going way beyond "this is my story." If you love the book, part of what you love is that she's weaving history of England like we mentioned before and White and her own story. One line I really like on page eight, she says, "The existence of the goshawks gives the lie to the thought that the wild is always something untouched by human hearts and hands. The wild can be human work." That is actually a bigger takeaway than we might note at the time, but as I looked back I realized that she just created a huge space for us to wander around in with her as she begins to bring in all these layers to her story. The beginning of hearing about White and his story called *The Goshawk* is on page 29. "It's summer of '79 and I'm an eight-year-old girl in a bookshop." She starts to read about White and his book about goshawks. She doesn't really know much about them yet, but she says on page 31 at the top, "Gos became real to me. He had steely pinions and a mad marigold eye. He cheeped like a songbird and was terrified of cars. I liked Gos." The reason that matters, how she wrote that, is that she's taking her own inner world and she's making it very real by specifics. When she talks about the details that are in the book about when she is young that she's reading, she's taking her actual history being an eight-year-old girl, reading the book in a small scene there and then reacting to Gos. And this is right before she introduces White officially. What is important is how, though there's a dreamlike quality, I feel, throughout this whole book, there's

a way that Helen actually grounds us in all kinds of ways that I don't think we're aware of—at least I wasn't when I read it straight through. Only when I was looking to see how did she do this did I find it. On page 34 she says, "This is Mr. White." And then she is in the present tense, and notice her technique. "It is 16 March 1936 on the east side of the great palladium palace of the stone school." And then she talks about "Mr. White, head of English, blankets bunched up against his shins, balances a notebook on his knees and he's writing. He thinks he'll leave. School is unreal to him." So what she's in is in present tense through the point of view of White, which is unusual. Brooke and I teach about point of view a lot and we usually say, OK, if you want to grab somebody else's point of view, have it be somebody you know really well or are related to. We know that Helen knows White very well even though she's not related to him by the specifics of detail and of his history that she includes. She becomes—this is a very psychological book. It is exploring the nature of grief through other means besides her own story of grief. She even brings in Freud, which I thought was pretty exciting and interesting. So she starts talking about projections and introjections and this matters because she's introjecting White's story inside of her and his struggle with his hawk. She analyzes—she uses Freud's term—to talk about what White is doing in his own struggle as a man—as a gay man at a time when he had to be closeted—and his struggle with his own life, being an outsider. There are themes of being an outsider that parallel—I'm going to talk about more parallels in a minute. We start to see the world through White by the use of point of view and present tense. So this gets very dreamy, because she merges with the hawk and she merges with White and there are many examples of how she does this. One, on page 95 in the chapter called "Darkness," she's looking at death through this whole thing—she's talking about her father, which is woven in there. I'm going to talk more about him in my next point that I address. But she says, "I start speaking to the hawk. I think to the hawk in a voice as low and reassuring as I can make it." She starts to kind of get into the mindframe of her own hawk. She tracks in specifics all the way through. There are so many places I can't possibly cover them, but many places where she is tracking very directly White's experience with his own hawk and his own fear of loss, and he does actually lose his hawk. There are parallels in White's story and stories that he identifies with, so we have this sort of British literature thread running through it, both for herself and what she reads and what White is reading and what she is assuming that White is thinking. Again, this is an experimental story and she's making things up. Then I want to just talk about the parallels for a minute. On page 160, the parallel between Helen and White is all the way through. The theme of the whole book is death and disintegration, and it's also the search for integration and life. So in that sense, it's a full arc of life itself. One place I found very interesting where she's very specific about this in a beautiful description is page 160. She's talking about her hawk. She says, "Every part of her was boiling with life, as if from a distance you could see a plume of steam around her, coiling and ascending and making everything around her slightly blurred so she stood out in fierce corporeal detail. The hawk was a fire that burned my hurt away. There could be no regret or mourning in her, no past or future. She lived in the present only and that was my refuge." She goes right from there—she does a line break and she goes into the parallel story of White and how he is struggling with life and death. He kept a journal so he has a notebook in which he talks about living for his hawk, becoming a half-bird himself. If the hawk dies, he's afraid he'll die with it. So you get a very direct parallel. I do not know how she put this together—it must have been something to find such parallels that then she knitted together in her story. Moving on just a little bit further here, she's going back on page 172 to her mother's home which was once her father's home. She's still coping very strongly with his death and she goes to

her bedroom and sees the books that she used to love and she starts thinking about her life before loss and then she takes the book *The Goshawk* and holds it to her chest. She says, "For the first time, I understood that vast blankness that shuddered his heart in horror. He wrote in his diary, 'I cannot remember that my heart stopped beating at any particular time. The blow was so stunning and so final. It was after six weeks of unrelenting faith." He's talking about his hawk. "'It was tempered to me as going beyond my appreciation. Death will be like this—something too vast to hurt much or even upset me.'" So he's talking about death and we know as we read that that she's taking in what he says about death to try to understand how she feels. There's a quote I love—I think we've probably shared it with you all before, but do you want to do it again? Because it's a marker—many of the things that Brooke and I are trying to show you in the book are examples and marking places that you can look back at yourself. This line, "The archaeology of grief is not ordered." This is on page 199. "It is more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten. Surprising things come to light, not memories only, but states of mind and older ways of seeing the world." She is thinking about grief and her own and then she goes on and talks about World War II and the falconers' club and history and White and she pulls all this together. It's really quite amazing. Then at the end—by page 220 she's coming to terms more with her father's death, which I'll talk about later, actually. I do want to say this: on page 248 we have a complete merging and it's along the line of the healing arc now of her and White. She says this at the top of page 248: "In the imagination, everything can be restored. Everything mended. Wounds healed. Stories ended. White could not trap his lost hawk, but as Merlin"—she's talking about the book *The Sword in the Stone*—"he does, and with the ring of upturned feathers in a fishing line, he brings it in triumph back to the castle and White gives himself a new pupil to train. Not a hawk, but the boy who will be king." So if any of you know White's books, or you may want to watch the Disney movie—I ordered, actually, *The Sword in the Stone* based on reading this book. I don't know if I've ever read it and besides, Disney probably doesn't do it thoroughly enough. The big takeaway for this is how very specifically she tracks all of this. And of course, it's tracked all the way through. I just brought up the highlights for you to look at. It might be interesting as you read it, if you're reading it a second time, is to notice where she does certain things and do your own charting of these threads. Brooke?

BW: I was just thinking about what you said, about how does she do that? It would be really interesting—I'm sure she'll speak about it or has spoken about it already, this question of what came first. Was it the going through the grief or was it this realization that there were these parallels she was seeing since she was so familiar with White's work. It's quite fascinating. I'm talking about universal versus specific grief and why both matter. Why both matter in this book, but I also think thematically why universal and specifics matter regardless of what your particular theme is about. Helen has all these themes, as we've talked about, and grief is one of them. It's a very specific one and it's a through thread and it's really an arc—we talked about this in last week's class, about how the memoir itself follows an arc of grief. In this case, she has specific and universal instances of grief. If you know what your main theme is, then you can also be paying attention to where you're doing universal versus specific and then what does that even look like and why do it. I'm going to be giving a fair number of examples right now, but I also specifically am asking you to pay attention to how different they are—the universal versus specific. And then in some cases, I would argue that the universal ones are takeaways. So we're not getting into takeaways in tonight's class—I think we might get into it in the fourth class. Linda Joy and I teach a lot about takeaways specifically because we believe that it really is the

heart of memoir. Takeaway is this question of what is in it for the reader, and it also is a space where you're conscientiously trying to write in a way that resonates with your reader. That is a very specific kind of craft point and I think it's perhaps—I would say it is—more relevant in memoir than it is in other genres. Perhaps in self-help, but self-help is very focused on what is in it for the reader. And then fiction isn't at all. So in memoir, you are looking at this question of what is the reader going to take away from my story. That's where you start to implement these universal messages. If you can do it thematically, then you are harnessing something. Let's talk about some universal examples of grief. I'll start on page 13, which I read in I think either the last class or the freebie. She starts in on the bottom of page 13. "Here's a word: bereavement. Or bereaved—bereft. It's from the old English 'bereafian,' meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob.' Rob, seize—it happens to everyone, but you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try." Right away, it's in the second person. She's speaking to you and you feel it. She opens with "Here's a word," but then she says, "it happens to everyone," and you go, yeah. It resonates and you understand and you can feel it, but you feel it alone. So she's speaking to you as if you know grief intimately and personally as she does. This is not about her grief, although, of course, it connects to her grief. Undoubtedly, she's writing about her own experience of grief. And then the next example—there are examples throughout the book, so I don't want to suggest that the examples that I'm giving are the only ones. These are just some of the ones that I'm tracking. On page 58, at the top of the page: "What happens to the mind after bereavement makes no sense until later." I just want to point out that that's just a sentence, but it's very fascinating that she really is paying attention to this language of grief. "What happens to the mind after bereavement makes no sense until later." It's an opening. Like Linda Joy just said, it's fascinating how she's constantly anchoring you. She's really paying attention to the language, to talking about grief—she's seeding it all over the place. It's super conscious and well-done. You're never forgetting what you're reading about or the fact that her father has died or the fact that she's training this hawk as a form of escape—to do something totally crazy. Interestingly, both to take her away and to bring her closer at the same time to something that she doesn't fully understand, but we're on this journey with her. On page 92—I just thought this was fascinating. I bring it up only because I think it is a takeaway. It's somewhat of a non-sequitur in the sense that it's about alcohol and it's about White. But White is abusing alcohol, as many people do, because of grief. So when she talks about grief and White's drinking—I just think this is very interesting. It's kind of in the middle of page 92, and it says, "I knew the notion was fanciful, but even so, there seemed some deep connection between White's drinking and his evasiveness. I was sure it was the drink that irrigated White's constant self-sabotage, for it is a common trait of alcoholics to make plans and promises to oneself or to others fervently, sincerely, and in hope of redemption—promises that are broken again and again through fear, through loss of nerve, through any number of things that hide that deep desire at heart to obliterate one's broken self."

LJM: Wow.

BW: I know, right? Anyone living with alcoholism would be like, whoa. It's powerful and it's universal. She speaks from some sense of knowing about this and it's a very—in my opinion, this serves as a takeaway. It serves as something much more universal. You guys can look to do that kind of writing. I talk about this as kind of a turning the mirror outward—there's a certain space in which instead of it being an inward—so much of memoir is inward. There is self-

analysis and processing and making sense of your experience, but there is an equal part of memoir that is about turning outward and about exploration and about inviting the reader to look at themselves. If you're not doing the latter, you're not writing an effective memoir yet. Really pay attention to these examples of universal themes and you can implement them in a lot of different ways thematically, like I'm talking about. On page 141, I thought this was particularly interesting because it goes from universal to specific quite quickly. After the line break on the top of page 141, she writes, "The anger was vast and it came out of nowhere. It was the rage of something not fitting. The frustration of trying to put something in a box that is slightly too small." Again, she moves into the second person here. "You try moving the shape around in the hope that some angle will make it fit in the box. Slowly comes an apprehension that this might not after all be possible, and finally you know it won't fit. No, there is no way it can fit, but this doesn't stop you using brute force to try to crush it in, punishing the bloody thing for not fitting properly." She's doing this all the time, and the more you guys can recognize that this is a real universal thing—when you read this, you feel the anger. You feel her anger, but you also feel connected to your own anger if you are in a space to be feeling that. And then on the very next page, she's talking about hatred, which I referenced last time, and then at the bottom of the page: "Then I started crashing my father's car. I didn't mean to; it just happened. I backed up against boulders, scraped wings against walls, heard the sound of metal squealing in agony over and over again. And I'd get out of the car and rub my new gouges numbly with my fingers as if somehow that might fix them, though they ran through the paint to the metal below. 'Are you punishing your father's car because he left you?' asked the psychoanalytically minded and fairly tactless friend." Here she's talking about her own anger, and I really want you to pay attention to the difference, of course. I've been giving examples of specific—excuse me, grief. This is about anger, but it's also about grief. It's about how she's taking out her grief. So this is a very specific example and it's powerful to note the difference. You get lost in the scene here—there's specificity. She's crashing the car; her friend asks her if she's punishing the car—that is totally different from anything else that I've read to this point. So let me give you another example of specific grief. That could be on page 184. This is about her dad and it's the whole page, really. The paragraph here where she says, "I stare at the hawk as she grips the dead pheasant and her mad eyes stare right back at me. I am amazed. I don't know what to expect. I don't know what I expected to feel. Blood lust? Brutality? No, nothing like that." She's really talking about what she's feeling and I won't read the whole thing, but she is really talking—there's a place throughout, actually, where she truly is the mother of the hawk. There is a direct parallel—again, if we're talking about parallels—between her father's and her relationship and her relationship with Mabel. At the end she says, "The wind shifts and then she is gone, and then I start crying soundlessly. Tears roll down my face for the pheasant, for the hawk, for Dad and all his patience. For that little girl who stood by the fence and waited for the hawks to come." That just actually made me cry when I read it. It's so touching and it's a moment of profound grief. It's very personal. And you still, obviously, feel it and you feel this sense of nostalgia and sadness and missing her father and the girl that she was and all of these things—this dynamic between parent and child. But obviously it's very specific grief and there is a difference between that and the universal that I was sharing earlier. So I'll give you one more example of the specific. I think the specific, honestly, is a little easier to find, but still it's important to note them. On page 268—we're nearing the end and this is a powerful moment because she understands. The last paragraph of the chapter, page 268: "I held the cardboard and felt its scissor-cut edge. For the first time, I understood the shape of my grief. I could feel exactly how big it was. It was the

strangest feeling, like holding something the size of a mountain in my arms. 'You have to be patient,' he had said. 'If you want to see something very much, you just have to be patient and wait.' There was no patience in my waiting, but time had passed all the same and it worked its careful magic. And now, holding the card in my hands and feeling its edges, all the grief had turned into something different. It was simply love. I tucked the card back into the bookshelf. 'Love you too, Dad,' I whispered." It's very touching. This one is super specific—these are moments of scene as well. She's found this card and this tangible reminder of her father—it's quite beautiful. I have so many more examples, but start to track those things in the books that you read. Look for these moments of takeaway, and as I say here on the slide, it makes the story more relatable. You could hear by the examples that I read, particularly the universal ones, how much it feels like she's reaching into your emotional terrain and saying, "Feel this. We know what grief feels like, so connect with me here." And you do.

LJM: I've got a couple that are exactly the same as yours up to a point. We're trying to show you both what she does and kind of the principles, so what I think is important to notice in this next set is how she uses physicality to ground us. Even though she's also talking about memory and she's talking philosophically a lot, but she does a lot of specific grounding. I always tell people when they're writing about grief, sometimes they'll start their first chapter and they're saying essentially I'm so sad that my father died or whatever, and I'll say, the reader doesn't know your father yet. In order to have us grieve with you, we need to care about him first. We need to see him, certainly. Helen weaves our ability to relate to her grief about her father all the way through, but she begins very early. She begins on page 10, actually, and she's been hiking. We've been with her—she's looking for hawks. She's talking about goshawks and the history of falconry and then she says she's remembering being nine years old. "I felt my small girl fingers hook through the plastic chain link of the fence and the weight of the pair of east German binoculars around my neck." Notice how specific—east German binoculars. "I was bored. I was nine. Dad was standing next to me. We were looking for sparrow hawks. They nested nearby, and that July afternoon we were hoping for the kind of sighting they sometimes give us—a submarine ripple through the tops of the pines as one swept in and away. The glimpse of a yellow eye. A barred chest moving against needles or a quick silhouette stamped black against the sky. But when you are nine, waiting is hard." I just want to say before I go on that you have a very specific thing that you were waiting to see or they had seen, but the specifics really make this work. We can see them. She's with her father. She's squirming, fidgeting—she says, "I let out a sigh, hung off the fence with my fingers. Then my dad looked at me, half exasperated, half amused, and explained something. He explained patience. He said it was the most important thing of all to remember: this. That when you wanted to see something very badly, sometimes you had to stay still and stay in the same place and remember how much you wanted to see it and be patient. 'When I'm at work taking photographs for the paper,' he said, 'I have to sit in the car for hours to get the picture I want. I can't get up to get a cup of tea. I have to be patient. If you want to see hawks, you have to be patient too.'" Then she goes to the next paragraph, and this matters because she's leading you in a place you do not realize at that moment. "You learn. Today, I thought, I'm not nine, but I was patient and the hawks came." She starts to walk away. At the end of the chapter, about six lines later, she says, "My mother called and told me my father was dead." When we find that, and it's a surprise—I mean, you might hear what the book is about in general, but you don't know—when you're a reader, you're inside the story. It's like, oh, we were just with him. So because we were just with him and we were learning about

patience with her through him, we're startled. I was. I was like, oh no, and then she goes right into the next chapter and talks about her mother calling and what she told her and the details. That's the other thing, is that she uses details both in the scene where she's hearing about her father's death and what her mother says and what they find out. She weaves all that together. She doesn't use much dialogue, but she weaves in the thoughts and what memories she can. She creates, basically, a sense of shock. And then we get to what Brooke already read, which was she starts to dissect or analyze the word "bereavement," and she brings in the old English and she talks about shock. Because she's a professor, she does that in a very different way than maybe another writer would. And then—I'm just doing the grounding of the specifics she uses here for the first bits about his death. "I can't even now arrange the memories in the right order. They're like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places, but they don't make a story." Notice she's using a simile—the memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I think when you're writing about something that is hard to pin down, that it very much helps to use metaphors and similes the way that she does. Then on page 15 at the bottom, there is a funeral. She mentions the funeral and I thought, oh gosh, isn't there going to be some sort of service? Much later there is, but what she starts to track is her breakdown and the grief that she is having. Then another place where she is feeding the disintegration—she starts to track the disintegration immediately. Page 16: "Things of no import burst into extraordinary significance. I read my horoscope and believed it. Auguries. Huge bouts of déjà vu. Coincidences. Memories of things that hadn't happened yet. Time didn't run forward anymore." She is trying to give you sensory expressions of what this oddness is like. I've experienced moments where I couldn't quite get ahold of reality after someone died—they were just there and now they're not and it doesn't actually make sense. Especially, I think, if it's someone you're close to. You're in a sense of suspended reality. It's very hard to even find words for that, so she tries to create—I believe she does well at creating—the sensations of that experience. So she starts to track the hawks—the theme of hawks—and the theme of death. On page 21: "There was something more to that day than my first sight of death." And the death that she's seeing is the hawk killing a rabbit. I was sort of reading, oh birds, how interesting, and then it gets very intense about killing and blood and murder and things like that after a while, so that's different. Like we've said, she weaves specifics in with this dream life. She has a dream sequence at the bottom of page 62: "That night, I dreamed of my father. It wasn't the usual dream of a family reunited. In the dream, I'm searching for something in a house—an empty house. I can't find what I'm looking for. There are no walls, just air falling into the pale violet of a city evening." She describes this bomb site from World War II very well, and then she realizes that the boy she's looking at in the dream is her father and that he used to play in bomb sites, which kids did in England during the war and after the war. So he's a boy and she's grieving, really, for his whole life. A little bit further on—a couple of things I just want to mention are that finally, on page 214 we get to his memorial and as we've said, there are just so many places where she's weaving in all of these layers at once. Finally, there is this chapter called "Memorial," and I just want to read a little bit about it because I want to show you how she uses language. She says, "Outside, winter breathed in. Papery skies, glittering trees, a wash of backlit fields that folded and shrank as the city grew. Then I was at the church, folder in hand, staring at hundreds of feet on the black and white floor. Hundreds of shoulders and ties and points of collars, hems of skirts, quicks and echoes of tiny black heels. I worried I hadn't dressed smartly enough. I was wearing a black dress from Debenhams. Maybe it was the wrong thing. Why hadn't I got a proper outfit?" So she starts panicking about what she's wearing. But notice the very important specifics and the language is clipped in there, and then there are questions—

you can hear her reflecting and thinking. It's just a really beautiful example of—instead of saying I came to this funeral and worried about what I was wearing and there were a lot of people around, we hear it, we feel it, and it's that little staccato shock like you're sort of watching it from a distance. She creates that psychology. One more final little quote that I love—and it's a takeaway like Brooke was talking about. It's on page 171, and she says, "You expect the world to be full of new things, but it's really full of holes." She connects the loss of her father with White on this page, and I'll say a little bit more: "There comes a day when you realize that's not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes, essences, losses, things that were there and are no longer, and you realize too that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where memories are." Notice she maneuvers present tense, past tense, "you," and the universal there. I think it's a beautiful passage that we can really relate to.

BW: I think it's one of those beautiful passages that are kind of amazing to look at and see how you can figure out how to do something similar in your own work. This is a great segue, because Linda Joy just mentioned the clipped language. She does use this clipped way of writing, I think pretty conscientiously. I'm going to give some descriptions of that. This slide says, "The language of grief is metaphor and poetic descriptions that capture the reader and help you, the writer, understand how language helps support theme development." So this is getting pretty specific, clearly, but it's important because there are a lot of moments where she's doing this very conscientiously. It's in her writing, it's in how she's talking about things—I think this is a super interesting topic, actually, and it's something I've been thinking about. Linda Joy and I have been reading Mary Karr and I interviewed Mary Karr recently and I've been thinking a lot about her take on truth and the way that you choose what belongs in your memoir. There's a part of this choice of language and the way that you describe things and what belongs. Mary Karr at one point talked about the truth of an experience like pulling at taffy. That has stuck with me as an image because you are choosing what to write about in a way that enhances and supports theme development. It doesn't mean that it didn't happen—we're not suggesting that you pull some supportive thing out of the sky that is not true. But you can choose these moments that can help to support what you're writing in a way that feels more thematically true, and then also sort of has a similar vibe or essence to it. I'll start with that concept on page 17. I say in the note here—the first bullet point—that the world is mirroring her grief. This is on page 17, and she's talking about right in the aftermath of her dad's death. At the top of the page it says, "Weeks passed. The seasons changed. The leaves came. The mornings filled with light. The Swiss returned, screaming past my Cambridge house as a disguise of early summer and I began to think I was doing fine." Then it changes for her. The second paragraph on this page says, "Then the world itself started to grieve. The skies broke and it rained and rained. The news was full of inundations and drowned cities, lost villages at the bottoms of lakes, splashed blood spilling over the M4 motorway to strand holiday traffic. Kayaks on town streets in Berkshire. Rising sea levels. The discovery that the English Channel was carved out by the bursting of a giant superlake millions of years ago. And the rain continued, burying the streets in half an inch of bubbling water, breaking shop canopies, making the River Cam a café au lait surge thick with broken branches and sodden undergrowth. My city was apocalyptic. 'I don't see the weather as odd at all,' I remember a friend saying to me." I thought this was interesting because it's like she lists all of these horrible things—it truly is an apocalypse. And then her friend says, "I don't see the weather as odd at all." There's a big juxtaposition and you can see, though, what she's saying

is the world is mirroring her grief and the language of that paragraph is quite profound and interesting to look at. I want to encourage you to re-read that and see how she consciously chooses this. All of these things must have happened, but also it was what she was paying attention to. And then let's look at page 45 for a language lesson. The middle of the page that starts with "feral": "Feral—he wanted to be free. He wanted to be ferocious, he wanted to be fey, a fairy, forox. All those elements of himself. He pushed away his sexuality, his desire for cruelty, for mastery. All of these were suddenly there in the figure of the hawk. White had found himself in the hawk that Blaine had lost." You can go on and read the full paragraph—obviously it's really interesting. The choice of these words, that they all start with F—there is this freedom and these words also are through threads. They show up throughout, particularly fey, fairy, forox. She uses these words to describe White and she consciously repeats them in different moments through the book. Again, this is another place where language comes in and where she's using fierce language, I think. It's an interesting way to look at a way to write, basically. Let's look at page 157 where her language mirrors her madness. This is what Linda Joy was just talking about when she was talking about the clipped language. It starts right in the middle of page 157. "The rain continues. It dampens the house. Parchment stains bleed across the wall in the hall and front room. The house smells of stagnant water in the coal cellar. Hawk mutes and dust. Nothing is moving. Nothing improving. Nothing heading anywhere. I am packing up boxes to leave, still not knowing where I'd live when the house was gone. In a fit of bitter misery, I make a fort out of an old cardboard wardrobe box in the spare room upstairs and crawl inside. It is dark. No one can see me. No one knows where I am. It is safe here. I curl up in the box to hide. Even in my state of sickness, I know this is more than a little strange. I am not going mad, I tell myself. I am ill. That is all." This is a beautiful passage to look at. Helen's emotion is really intertwined in the language. You feel her state of madness. Who would do this? Going into your spare room and taking a cardboard wardrobe box and crawling inside and falling asleep. You have to be a little bit out of your mind to do that, and she's in a state of sickness, shock, madness, but the writing mirrors that. It's a really good passage to look at. And then another one I'm going to share on page 70 and then we'll move into Q&A. There are these examples throughout. I think that it is actually one of Helen's talents. Different authors do different things really well. Cheryl Strayed was a genius at takeaway, and we spent a whole class talking about takeaway and how she'd do this and all these connections that she made. Frank McCourt was characterization—his characters were incredible. It was amazing to see how he did characterization. And for Helen, I think this language—because she's such a genius at language and how she's really able to mirror her states of mind in her language is quite profound. Let's turn to page 170 and I want to show this description of panic which is right in the middle of the page, the third paragraph down. It says, "And suddenly she is back on the glove. I feel soaked in ice water. I cannot believe she's not lost. I feel like light. A tyro, a fool, a beginner, an idiot. 'Never mind,' says Stuart. He knows I am in pieces. I catch the flash of his grin in the darkness. 'She's too high and it's getting dark. But you got her back, right? That's always a good end to the day.' I can barely speak. I croak a reply. The adrenaline fits and fizzes in my veins as I walk back to the car and I am still not sure how I managed to drive home." What I love about that passage is that—there's more prior to that of course, if you go back and read the whole page you can see her state. Her adrenaline is soaring and these descriptions are powerful. You feel a surge of adrenaline in yourself. The power of making people feel emotion on the page is the power of good language and good writing and she, of course, is a master. Mere mortals can only hope to approximate what she's done here, but these lists that she does and these punctuated ways of describing things—she does this all the

time. “A tyro, a fool, a beginner, an idiot.” It punctuates and it emphasizes these different states that she gets herself into and there’s an intensity to it that is quite moving, frankly. It’s not necessarily moving in a positive way—it could be moving in an intense or anxiety-provoking way, but at least she’s moving you. Again, I think it’s a good suggestion—many of you are reading through for the first time—but to read again at some future point and/or to look at some of these passages and see how she does what she does. It’s quite brilliant. Let’s take some questions. I’m hoping you guys have some for us. I did want to share something, actually, that Britain sent in advance of the class and she said I could. Britain is here. I love this, what you said, Britain. It says, “I’m not finished with the book yet, but I’m profoundly struck by the deeply private interiority of Macdonald’s work. Indeed, I must go to a similar deep, quiet place to read her with reverence and the attention her story requires. Demands is too strong a word, and yet it is so. She has invited us into the deep crevices of her intelligence, raw talent, immense vocabulary, and pain. There is no way to take this lightly, and for this—for it feels like a gift—I am grateful. I cannot help but think the at least subtle way my own thinking about my eventual memoirs will shift as a result of *H Is for Hawk*.”

LJM: That’s beautiful.

BW: It was beautifully written and I love it, because I totally agree with you. I think that it is a gift and I think that it is—I like what you said, that there’s a reverence that her story requires and that demands is perhaps too strong a word, and yet it is so. You have to be present to read this book. You can’t just—this is not subway reading. Thank you for that, Britain. It’s really beautifully written and thank you for letting us share it.

LJM: That would look great on an Amazon review too, because I think you’re talking about things that not everybody responds to in that way. I think that helps other people think about how they would read that book and maybe help them want to buy it.

BW: Yeah, that would be a great Amazon review, so maybe you’ll do that. Carol is asking, “Do you think she has these insights and then writes around and through them or does she get these while writing and works on the metaphors?”

LJM: Probably both. We don’t know exactly what she—do you know anything about that, Brooke?

BW: I have no idea about her process. A lot of times, like I said—this is one of the difficulties or downsides, I guess, of teaching a book that is so recent is that Helen is out right now doing her talks. But if you want to teach Mary Karr you can watch about 100 interviews. If you want to teach Helen, there’s not a whole bunch of stuff on YouTube of her talking about her process. I think we’ll find out as the years go along here.

LJM: We can also speak to the fact that writers do both. Sometimes you know what you want to say and you’re getting it down there and you develop it, and other times you start writing and something else happens and you go, oh, that’s what I was trying to do. I think actually both happen, but we don’t know exactly what happened with her.

BW: I imagine a lot is happening in revision with her. Not only Helen, but lots of people. To get into that deep a level, it's not happening on the first draft. The deepening of the language and the choices that she's making—there's a lot of powerful stuff there.

LJM: I assume that a book like this has been revised 50 times, at least.

BW: Yeah, I would probably make that assumption as well. When we were talking earlier about takeaway, Britain had said that there's also takeaways in creative nonfiction. And yeah, you're totally right. The only thing that I wanted to maybe build upon that comment with was the idea that memoir is under the umbrella of creative nonfiction. If you're thinking about these different big-picture categories, there's obviously all fiction and then all creative nonfiction and memoir is a subset of creative nonfiction. So in that context, absolutely. I think this question of takeaway is—for those of you who want to publish and want your work to be for other people, it's pretty critical. It's critical that you think about when you're entering into a scene, why is this here, what is this scene doing, what do I want my reader to get, and then to try to use language—like I was talking about in those earlier examples—to turn that mirror outward. I think it's also why memoir as a genre—we have talked about in lots of our classes, it's sort of a loved and hated genre at the same time. There are certainly people who criticize it for being this navel-gazey kind of craft in particular. But I think the reason that it's gained as much legitimacy and so many fans is because people do this relatable writing and because you see yourself and you experience emotions through the experience of others. So the more you can pay attention to doing that, the more successful memoir you'll have.

LJM: Absolutely.

BW: Anybody else? Obviously feel free to comment—it need not be a question. We have next week's class using language again, because language is so critical to what she's done. But I also wanted to note that a couple of you have asked to address tenses, so we are going to add that in. We'll have a whole section on tenses. This is helpful, because some of you are e-mailing and asking and Cora had asked for a couple of specific things about showing versus telling. So since next week's class is about craft, we'll get into some specifics about that. And Mary is saying yes—or yay about tenses. Good. It's a big deal. Cora is asking, "Is there a similar book that is not as complex but applies some of the same principles?" Which principles are you talking about specifically, Cora, if you don't mind typing that in.

LJM: There are a lot of principles we're covering.

BW: If you're talking about takeaway specifically, then that's one thing. And like I said, *Wild* is absolute mastery. So let us know and we can send you some ideas.

LJM: The unusual thing—the experimental thing about this is using White's story like she does. I can't think of any memoir, although of course it's hard to think right on the spot. Nothing I can think of right now is doing that same thing. But in an experimental memoir, people come at different angles and bring in other layers of the human experience or someone else's story. Some people bring in geography, archaeology—you can bring in other layers as a metaphor. That happens.

BW: And Cora just specified that she's talking about universal versus personal grief.

LJM: We'll think on it, Cora. We'll think on it, because there are some other books. I have a couple that I'm going to look at to see how they do it.

BW: And to be clear about what's happening, there are two Coras in class. One Cora is saying, "I don't think I asked that question." So we've got two Coras and then Carol is recommending Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*.

LJM: I was just thinking of Terry Tempest Williams. She has the layers in there. And I think Jill Ker Conway? Anyway, we'll see what we can find.

BW: Maybe you can type that in the window, Linda Joy, so people can see the spelling. And Jane is asking, "How do you listen to the class recordings?" If you did not get a class recording e-mail from me last Tuesday, let me know. You're all on a list and it's through my e-mail server and so it's possible that it got blocked or something, so just let me know. It will go out first thing tomorrow morning and if you didn't get last week's I will forward it to you. They are coming as a matter of course on Tuesday mornings. We're getting the audio and the video. And Cora is asking about the freebie—the freebie is online. So I'll send that to you, Cora. Again, those are just e-mails that went out and are easy to miss.

LJM: I'm going to mention—Brooke, I have to send it to you because it doesn't go to everybody, but the book I'm mentioning is *Black Dog of Fate* and it's by Peter Balakian. It's his story woven in with his grandparents' experience of the Armenian Holocaust. But how he discovers it is through the ways that people act in his family and his own curiosity eventually. It weaves in many other layers of story.

BW: Awesome. So we've got a few suggestions. And thank you all so much and look for the e-mail tomorrow morning. We will see you a week from today.

LJM: See you all soon. Bye bye.

BW: Thanks. Bye.

Class 3. Using Language to Captivate and Wow Your Reader

Brooke Warner: Hi, everyone. Welcome. Thank you for being here for week number three, where we're going to be talking about using language to captivate and wow your readers. It's an important topic—how do we do it, and obviously Helen has a knack.

Linda Joy Myers: Oh my gosh, I just love it. Love the writing, love the language. There's so much—it's so rich that you almost feel like you've eaten too much dessert or something.

BW: Exactly. We're getting a good morning from Rachel, who I think is joining us from Australia if I remember correctly. Hello and thank you for being international and attending. It's great. We're going to open by talking about tense. This is actually a change in the syllabus and comes by request, so the original thing that we were going to cover was about metaphor and language. Linda Joy is going to cover that in a different section. Since you guys have been eagerly wanting to understand this tense situation, that is what we're going to dive into. It is interesting to look at someone like Helen in *H Is for Hawk* and how she plays around with tense. The only other person I know who does tense quite as fluidly as Helen is Frank McCourt, actually. Of the people we have taught, especially. She is even more fluid in her tense changing, I think, than McCourt. We're going to look at this and how does she get away with it. Typically, Linda Joy and I are teaching in our classes that the only time to change tenses is after a line break. So you would have a very explicit line break and then you could move to past or present, whatever the alternating tense might be. But there are a couple of moments when Helen does it within the paragraph. So I want to note some of the devices that she uses to make it work. We'll start with the use of the word "now." If we could go to page 48, she says—the second paragraph starts, "You can buy it all on the Internet now." If you were to look at the previous paragraph above that, it says, "But the words weren't about social fear when I was small. They were magic words." And she's talking about all these words—hunting whip, riding crop, riding whip, or just a crop, a whip, et cetera. "They were magic words, arcane and lost. I wanted to master this world that no one knew, to be an expert in its perfect secret language." That's all obviously in the past tense, and then she switches and says, "You can buy it all on the Internet now." Using the word "now," she brings us into the present. "Just as hoods, belts, gloves, everything." It's just that one sentence. "But when I began falconry, most of us made our own equipment." That is one thing that's very clear, that she's basically—in some ways, she is pulling us into the now and you have to be careful, because Linda Joy and I teach that you don't want to pull the reader too much out of what it is you're describing by bringing them into the now. But in this instance, this actually works because she's talking about this stuff that used to be secret that now is not so secret because it's online. Then in the next paragraph it says, "I have a suspicion that all those hours making jesses and leashes weren't just preparation games." Again, now she's bringing us into the now to say, I have a suspicion. Now I have a suspicion—it wasn't then. It's interesting—she really does fluidly move back and forth, because then she says, "In a scrapbook of my childhood drawings is a small pencil sketch—" And this is clearly still in the present tense. "—of gloves; just an outline and not a good one. I was six when I drew it. The hawk has a dark eye, a long tail—" And so she's describing this thing that still exists. She drew it when she was six years old,

but she's looking at it from the now narrator, from the very much present tense. She continues on through the present until the part where she talks about her brother, who didn't survive. "I was the lucky one." On page 49, the middle of the page. "I was tiny, but survived. I had a twin brother. He didn't." So she's really fluidly moving back and forth here, but she's very much doing memory. So she's in the now and she's reflecting back on her memories. She's using this outline of a sketch that she drew when she was a little girl and she's talking about things from her childhood. And when she references childhood, she of course uses the past tense. On the subsequent page—page 51—there's another use of the word "now." The second paragraph on this page: "White's hawk was taken from the wild." This is past tense. "No one bred goshawks in captivity in the '30s. There was no need to try." It's all past, and then let's skip a couple of sentences. "A bundle of precipitous sticks and some white droppings was how he imagined his hawk's birthplace. He'd never seen a goshawk nest. But you can see one, and there's no need to strike out in the forest to do so. There's live feed of goshawk nests now on the Internet." She's using this device, and it works. You wouldn't want to overuse that, particularly, but you can see the fluidity is that she's really speaking from the now and then she's using the word "now" to bring us into the now. That's effective in these sections. Now I want to talk about using past versus present in scene. That's the most effective way, in my opinion—I think Linda Joy will agree with me on this point. For those of you who are not experienced with switching tenses, you might not want to attempt what Helen did. We read a lot of work where people are like willy-nilly with their tenses and it's so jarring. You're just like, whoa, we're in past, we're in present. Oftentimes when I ask our students about it, they'll say, oh, I wasn't paying attention. If you're not paying attention—it's not like Helen wasn't paying attention. She knew exactly what she was doing. So if you're switching tenses in your chapters, you've got to be really conscientious about what you're doing. Let's go all the way to chapter 13 and just take a look at what she does here. This did remind me a lot of Frank McCourt, where one scene would be in the past and then there would be a line break and then she would move into the present. On page 121, at the bottom of the page, it says: "'The condition of the hawk,' White wrote, 'was evidently a matter of exquisite assessment which could only be judged by the Austrian juror who knew his hawk.'" So she's writing in the past tense about White. Actually, now she does move into present tense: "Looking at Mabel, I can see she's reached her flying weight. It is as obvious to me as a change in the weather." It's very fascinating, actually. She's moving even more fluidly than I thought. If you go to page 122—

LJM: That's the definition of fluid, when we don't notice it, right?

BW: Even there, I actually wasn't expecting that when I just read that. But on this next page, 122, at the bottom you can see that there is a line break. She ends this paragraph on page 122—the long one—in the past tense. "At four o'clock, we set off for my college cricket pitch and her first calling off lesson. 'It'll be fine, Mabel. It's a long vacation. The place will be deserted—no cows.'" She's speaking. So this is all dialogue and that's done in the present. But then she has a line break and she switches to the present tense. If I were to advise you all in your own writing how to do this well and do it fluidly, it would be more along these lines where you have a very clear line break and then you move to either the past or present. Let's look at another example of this on page 140. This is where she moves from present to past with a line break. At the top of page 140 it says, "'Excuse me,' he says, and he sets in his shoulders once again, narrows his eyes into the sun and stalks off toward some poor tourists who have decided to have a picnic on the

corner of the college rugby pitch." So this is in the present. Then there's a line break and then she says, "I flew her later in the day. I flew her earlier. I fed her rabbit with fur and rabbit without. I fed her chickens." This is what would be effective for you all if you want to switch tenses, which is to have a particular scene that is done all in present or all in past and then to have those line breaks and then to move into the past. Or present, obviously—whichever one you're alternating. It's complex. I feel that she has such a facility with language and is so talented, actually, that she probably gets away with this. And she's a poet and she's a professor. I know a lot of you were curious about this, but I probably would not be in a writing class recommending that you try to go quite as fluidly as she does. Linda, do you have a comment before I move on to the next section here?

LJM: We're teaching something that's very literary and advanced. However, I think the importance of teaching it and having you look at it is that you learn to recognize—you get sort of hypnotized by the language, too, so you don't notice it. But we want you to read other books, noticing what are authors doing. You can read books and use them to highlight your own learning of new skills and noticing tenses in this case. I think it's a good example for that.

BW: Exactly. And on page 128—I just want to note this because if we're talking about tenses, there are multiple options for the past tense. There's simple past, past perfect, and imperfect. It's really great for you guys to do a little refresher on your English grammar and to think about what kind of tense do you want to use. I just want to make a note of when she uses the imperfect, because she does it often when she talks about the things that she and her father used to do. On page 128, at the bottom of the page, this is a great use of the imperfect. "'You must be a spy,' my father used to tell me. 'Must be.' He'd watch me as a child, sneaking about with binoculars, hiding for hours in the bushes and trees. I was the invisible girl." There is simple past. "Someone tailor-made for a secret life. 'No, really, I'm not,' I'd say." Back to imperfect for the hundredth time. "'I'm not.' 'But of course you'd say that,' and he'd laugh delightedly, because there was no way I could persuade him otherwise. 'It's a job, Dad,' I'd say, rolling my eyes." And it goes on. I love this and it's a really great example of using a past tense in an effective way. Lots of times people try to use imperfect and I ding them on it because I'll say, did this happen many times? Did it happen repeatedly or is this one time? Again, she's clearly using it effectively and conscientiously, so you guys can use these different past tenses, the simple past simply being "I was," "I made," "I did." The past perfect is the "had done." "We had been doing this." And the imperfect is this: "I would."

LJM: "Would" and "could" and "might" and "may."

BW: In these cases where she's saying, "my father used to tell me," that's imperfect, and "I would say for the hundredth time" gets condensed into "I'd say." "He'd laugh." Think about those things as you're considering your own writing, because varying up the tense in this way and using multiple kinds of past tenses is also quite effective. Let me cover the very last point here—I know we're going a little long with this one, but there's a lot of stuff to pack in here. It just has to do with the second person, which in the free version of this class—the first one we did—we talked about second person. It came up as a question. She uses it not a ton, but also a fair amount. It's very effective. I'm going to be talking about takeaway at the end of class today. We believe that using the second person can be an effective way to give the reader a takeaway. I

just want to give two examples of where she does it for you to see its effectiveness. One is on page 171 at the bottom of the page. “There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things, and then comes a day when you realize that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences, losses, things that were there and are no longer. And you realize, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps. Though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of space where the memories are.” It’s a gorgeous paragraph. I read it in the free call, as I said, but it really connects, and that’s the thing. You connect when you go into the second person because you basically ask the reader to inhabit the “you” and to feel what you’re feeling. It’s very effective. I just want to share one other example to see where she does it again. Page 177, toward the top—I won’t read the whole paragraph, but if you could just go about six or seven lines down where it says, “You pour your heart, your skill, your very soul into a thing. Into training a hawk, learning the form, in racing, or in the numbers in cards, then relinquish control over it. That is the hook. Once the dice rolls, the horse runs, the hawk leaves the fist, you open yourself to luck and you cannot control the outcome.” I won’t read the whole thing, but it goes on for a few more lines. What the “you” does is that it’s an immediate connect. It’s like an impact thing and it’s a different way to reach out to your reader. We do recommend doing it because it’s powerful, but also doing it sparingly. Those are some examples and hopefully ways that you can incorporate into your own memoir a little bit of second person because it is powerful writing.

LJM: Absolutely, it is. It makes it wonderful to read. We’ve talked before about using sensual details. To recap what they are, sensual details are a description that paints something very clearly. I’m going to read some of those for you. Sounds, tastes, smells, texture. Helen Macdonald is one of the most textured writers I have ever read. It’s layered and textured all the way through in so many ways—with language, with sensual details and description, with the way that the tenses are used—that’s very much of a layering situation. I have a few examples. There are so many, I didn’t even know what to choose, but I’m going to start early on and give you several different examples. Early on, she grounds us in landscape and history very early in the book. On page 22, she starts giving some history. And the other thing that we’re talking about today—I’m talking about sensual detail now, and later I’m going to be talking about showing and telling. But I’m just going to mention it now because in memoir, you also tell as well as show. What she weaves together are scenes that you can feel and you can see and she also tells you things, woven back and forth. We’re like unpicking a blanket here, to try to explain it to you. On page 23, she’s talking about this history and she is quoting other writers. The particularity is part of the detail here. Part of the particularities in the middle of the page is they’re talking about the different names that the goshawk has: “Vampire, Jezebel, Swastika, or even Mrs. Glass would fit her, but ill would become a peregrine.” She’s quoting these writers that were talking about goshawks. “Goshawks were ruffians. Murderous, difficult to tame, folky, fractious, and foreign.” Look at all those amazing adjectives. “’Bloodthirsty,’ wrote 19th-century falconer Major Charles Hawkins Fisher with patent disapproval. ‘Vile.’ For years, I was inclined to agree, because I kept having conversations that made me more certain than ever that I’d never train one.” She is weaving very closely and there are specifics about these writers who have been writing about—I didn’t know this; I don’t know that any of us knew this—writing about goshawks for the last several hundred years. I’ve missed a few things. In that particularity, you are weaving in her thoughts about wanting to fly a goshawk and finally doing it. Then there are some pretty amazing descriptions. I’ve got one here on page 123 and I’m just going to take little

chunks and sections. Listen for the specificity of the description. Listen for the way that you can feel by using these kinds of adjectives and these kinds of specific nouns and the particularity of it. “We stand uncertainly under the thatched roof of the pavilion. Behind us is a straggling coax of chestnut and limes and a ditch full of leaves and rainwater. The air about us is mild still, pointed with tiny flies, the sky dull and flat as unpolished brass. There’s an ill favor to the air. I’m not sure I want to be here. On the other side is a familiar building, a red brick Victorian Camelot with crenellated battlements, mullioned windows, and a tiny Gothic tower.”

BW: That’s hard even to read.

LJM: I know. It’s like a tongue twister. And this is her office. She describes her office: “Books, papers, a desk, a chair, a carpet of dove-colored wool, air that always smells of sunbaked dust even in winter when frost burns the glass and makes dropped shadows on the panes.” Well, we can really feel that office, can’t we? We get the smell, what it looks like, what the air is like, there’s an ill favor to the air—it’s a very interesting thing. Then she goes on a little bit further: “White doves fly up from the roof. I watch their wings flicker against the sky. Sudden vertigo. Something shifts in my head, then everything I see collapses into something else. I blink. It looks the same, but it isn’t.” So she’s talking about having kind of a shift in perception there. Just a little further down she has another description of this chapel, but notice how she describes it. “There’s a bronze cockerel in the dining hall and a skeleton in a cupboard in the fellow’s cloakroom. A real yellowed skeleton, held together with pins and twisted wire. Beyond my office building are a host of yew trees clipped into absurd windblown boulders. A bronze horse on one lawn and a hare on another.” On and on we go with this description of her college where she works. Somebody might just say, I went to my office at the college and tried to figure out what I wanted to do. That’s basically what she’s struggling with. She goes on and I just want to show the shape of this just a little bit here. “In two months, my college job will end. In two months, I will have no office, no college, no salary, no home. Everything will be different. But, I think, everything already is.” I’m going to talk about metaphors later, but there is one right here. “When Alice dropped down into the rabbit hole into Wonderland, she fell so slowly she could take things from the cupboards and bookshelves on the wall, look curiously at maps and pictures that passed her by.” She’s talking about what is she going to take with herself when she ends up leaving this particular job. This is coming after we realize, of course, that she’s quite grief-stricken and she’s already started training the hawk. I want to describe where she does a description of action. My point here is that she has slowed us down a lot to create these extended descriptions. The way that it can work is if they’re so specific. All three of my points kind of meld together, because she is doing all of these things at once. On page 125, “The hawk hops onto the rail of the wooden veranda and faces me in a low boxer’s crouch. I step back six feet, put half a chick—” She’s training her to eat off of her glove. “—extend my arm and whistle. There is no hesitation. There is a scratch of talons on wood, a flowering of feathers, one deep down stroke, the brief heavy swing of talons brought up and into play in a dull thud as she hits my glove.” She could say, “She flew from her perch to my glove,” but she takes more time and says exactly how she does it. She’s showing us what this real world of this goshawk is. She says, “For a creature with the tactical intelligence of a goshawk, this game is child’s play. The third time I put her on the railing, she’s already airborne as I turn my back. A skip of my heart, a hastily extended glove, and she’s at my side, wolfing down the rest of her food. Wings dropped, eyes blazing, a thing of perfect triumph.” Notice how she brings in singing next. “She flew

perfectly and I'm so pleased I start singing on the way home. I serenade my hawk with my favorite things, with whiskers and kittens and brown paper packages tied up with string. It strikes me that this must be happiness." Gosh. That's all in like a paragraph here. So I want you to notice that most of us would—at first, at least—write, I trained her to eat that day and she did a great job. But she slows it down so much it's like we are hypnotized. Brooke and I were talking earlier—we feel sometimes a little hypnotized by the way that she is writing these things and the very, very specifics. There are so many other examples, but I think you need to go ahead and do your turn, right Brooke?

BW: Sure, so we can leave a little time for Q&A too. This is a really complicated book is basically the takeaway that Linda Joy and I have. There is still a ton to learn from it. I still think it's very encouraging that this book is a bestseller because it's so gorgeous and I think that there's a lot said these days about books being too literary or both literary fiction and literary memoir not getting the attention they're due because commercial fiction is just easier to sell and people want to read commercial memoirs, so it's great. And for those of you who are really taken with it, I still think there's a ton to learn from her. That said, I don't know if we know many people who could write at the level of writing. And honestly, to some extent—not exclusively, but I think part of her being British plays into that. There's absolutely a different flavor of the language. There is something different about the British love for the English language and just the words that they use and their vocabulary. Of course, I don't want to make such a stereotype, but I think largely American writers tend to write a little more simply. Let's look at takeaway. This is one of my favorite topics. I love to look for it in books. I'm always looking for it in books, and so I just am in the habit of these things popping out at me. It's this question of what are the universal messages and how do you pay attention to these things so that you can become a better memoirist yourself? In *H Is for Hawk*, she really is showcasing the stages of grief. She does it sometimes explicitly and sometimes less explicitly, but she is talking about grief all over the place, which we've tracked the arc of the grief in a previous session. Now you can go through and look at the stages of grief. But that is a takeaway, because she's paying attention and she's talking to you about the nature of grief. I want to share a takeaway on page 43 which is smack dab in the middle of the page at the end of this section before the line break. She says, "For White, it was a moral magic trick. A way out of his conundrum." She's talking about this situation—his relationship with the hawk, his training of the hawk. "By skillfully training a hunting animal by closely associating with it, by identifying with it, you—" Here she goes into the second person again. "—might be allowed to experience all your vital, sincere desires, even your most bloodthirsty ones, in total innocence. You could be true to yourself." This is very powerful. It's a moment of talking about—excuse me, because I jumped to the second point here that says "Exploration of human nature: longing, the desire to break free." She connects to White because White—similar to her, even though his reasons were different—isolated himself, had certain longings and desires. Both of them wanted to be free from their situations. Her situation is the death of her father, something that she didn't want, didn't ask for, and his situation being that he's a gay man in the 1930s, which is very difficult. She relates to him and she writes about it and I love this because it's this moment where she invites you in to say you could be true to yourself. You have that moment of a connection, and so it is a universal message and a way that she is trying to outwardly connect. I've read this one already twice in class, but it's still a takeaway and takeaways often come at the beginning of chapters. Look at this, where it says on page 46, "When you are broken, you run. But you don't always run away. Sometimes,

helplessly, you run toward." To me—again, I don't want to suggest that it always has to be second person, because takeaways are often not in the second person, but sometimes they are. If you are struggling with takeaway, then it might be helpful to try to think about whether it's something you might want to implement as a practice. The phases of grief are throughout and so I just wanted to note that I think largely, that is something that is a through thread in this book. A through thread is something that moves through the book, that is a theme, that is being explored, excavated, that the writer pays attention to and brings into the consciousness of the reader. The through thread oftentimes becomes a takeaway because it is—when you ask yourself, what's in it for the reader? Then the reader might say, well, it's an exploration of grief and it's how Helen goes into her grief and comes back out. It is universal because all human beings know grief. We might not know it on the level that she is talking about, but it's also very easy to connect your grief. If your grief is not over a parent's death but maybe yours is over a child's death, maybe yours is over something that you longed for that you never had—that's a different kind of grief. People have a lot of different griefs manifesting in different ways, but that experience of grief is the same regardless. That is an interesting space to be thinking about connecting to readers and how you can translate it across faiths even if your experience is different from other people's. And I often say to people, don't think that your story is so unique, so much so that you end up alienating yourself from the reader. You could have a very unique story, but your themes and your emotional terrain is human. So therefore, no matter how unique your story is, you actually want to move toward the reader. You want to connect. You don't want to do this thing of inadvertently saying, oh, I'm so special or I'm so unique. Sometimes it comes from a sort of egotistical place of I feel special, I feel unique, and sometimes it's the exact opposite. You feel like shit. That's a different kind of special—I'm so special, I feel bad, I'm not like anyone else, I'm so different. Both of them are bad in memoir. It's all about connecting and offering the reader a window into their own soul—into their own heart. Not into yours. It's just your experience is giving them that doorway. Consider that when you're writing. Here's another moment—this is so small, and I wanted to say—I'm going to share here these general ones. This is the difference between an explicit takeaway and a subtle takeaway. The subtle one is first; it's on page 258. It's the second paragraph. It says, "The winter fields are shorn, yellowed into stocky, rabbit-grazed swaths spotted with foraging rooks." I mean, jeez, who could write a sentence like that? "I can stalk with Mabel all the way across this land until it ends in a slumpy hedge, so wide it's almost a wood, thoroughly iced with old man's beard. Beyond it is someone else's land." Here's the takeaway: "A terra incognita, holding the suppressed fascination we all have for places just beyond where we know or are supposed to be." That's it. "I stand at the top of the field, change the jess as we move her leash." OK, so she embedded this very subtle takeaway, but what she's doing is she's connecting you, saying beyond is someplace where we all long for. There's always that somewhere else or sort of the edge of our horizons—the radical edge. The place where, ooh, what is over there? She's speaking to human curiosity and she just takes the moment to connect to the reader in a broader way. She could have easily skipped that and just been like, I stand there and I'm doing this and I'm doing that, blah, blah, blah. But instead she does intentionally turn outward. That is the very definition of takeaway and what I like about this is that it's just one sentence. Now let's look at explicit takeaway on page 275. You wouldn't want to do this very often, but it can be particularly effective if you have transformation or if you really learned something or if you're tracking the heroine's journey and you're coming back with what you've learned. It's OK to tell the reader, this is what I learned. Helen does this in the middle of the page here, page 275. She writes, "Of all the lessons I've

learned in my months with Mabel, this is the greatest of all. That there is a world of things out there, rocks and trees and stones and grass, and all the things that crawl and run and fly. They are all things in themselves, but we make them sensible to us by giving them meanings that shore up our own views of the world." She goes on and you can read this whole paragraph—this is a lesson. This is what she's learned and she's choosing to pack this in here in a very explicit way. There's value in it. So many memoirists don't do this. Instead, they're just telling their story—I did this, I did this, with very little interpretation as to why does it matter. That question—answering the question why does it matter—she's giving a lot of why it matters and it's a meditation. A meditation of the natural world, a meditation on grief, a meditation on existence—so many things. I just want to leave this section to say that takeaway matters. Takeaway is a thing that connects you in a much deeper way to your reader, so we teach about takeaway in almost every single course that we teach. If you're like, oh, this is the first time I've ever heard of it, you might want to take a look at our class on *Wild* that we sell archived on our website. Cheryl Strayed is an amazing, gifted takeaway writer. This is something you all want to do in your own writing.

LJM: It's inspiring to be able to read people who do it so well. Like I said earlier, the whole learning how to write—we just got out of our two-day conference and the whole time we were talking about showing and telling in all kinds of different ways and reminding people that in memoir, we have to tell as well as show. The telling is the takeaway, the reflection. And in Helen's case in particular, part of the telling is educating you about goshawks and T.H. White and Freud and the history of goshawks and the details as well about training them and about everything—so many things having to do with them—as well as her own journey. In that case—in that way—it is similar to *Wild* in that there are several layers in this book and that's what makes it so complex and so interesting. You're showing the reader your world, and of course there are so many ways she does it. I've read some of them already, but here are some specifics again that I want to share with you of telling you things that help you understand the world of goshawks and what she is dealing with. This is page 54 and she first gets introduced to these two birds, actually. The man she meets brings two birds and she's only supposed to get one—she's supposed to get the other one. "The man was perfectly calm. He gathered up the hawk in one practiced movement, folding her wings, anchoring her broad, feathered back against his chest, gripping her scaled yellow legs in one hand. 'Let's get that hood back on,' he said tautly. There was concern on his face. It was borne of care." Now here's where she's going to tell you about this world: "The hawk had been hatched in an incubator, had broken from a frail bluish egg shell into a human Perspex box and for the first days of her life, this man had fed her with scraps of meat held in a pair of tweezers, waiting patiently for the lumpen, fluffy chick to notice the food and eat, her new neck wobbling with the effort of keeping her head in the air. All at once I loved this man, and fiercely. I grabbed the hood from the box and turned to the hawk. Her beak was open, her hackles raised. Her wild eyes were the color of sun and white paper and they stared because the whole world had fallen into them at once. Then I tucked the hood over her head." I didn't know how they were born or how they were fed, and you get this sense of this small bird—kind of vulnerable, pretty much. And then she contrasts it—again, keep in mind, if you can write something about contrast in your story and do contrasting—contrast one thing from another—it makes it very interesting. This is very true. She has another bird and it's different, but notice how she writes about this one. "Then we opened the other box, which was meant to hold the larger, older bird, and dear God, it did. Everything about the second hawk was different.

She came out like a Victorian melodrama." Again, we're using metaphor. "A sort of mad woman in the attic on the attack. She was smokier and darker and much, much bigger, and instead of twittering, she wailed. Great, awful gouts of sound, like a thing in pain, and the sound was unbearable. 'This is my hawk?' I was telling myself, and it was all I could do to breathe." She is like horrified by this. She doesn't say, "I was horrified by this." She didn't say she yelled loudly. She uses these amazing words—"Instead of twittering, she wailed. Great, awful gouts of sound." Speaking of unusual language. And so you are learning that she's afraid. She doesn't say it. She asks the guy to give her the other, smaller, more reasonable hawk that didn't scream. It's just the way that she slows down and shows you what she has—what she's dealing with. I have another example. There are so many amazing ones. This is an interesting way—she's writing a description and there's takeaway in it. On page 150, I was very moved by how she tried to write about her feelings in this particular paragraph. "On the way home, I felt a great and simple sadness. I missed my dad. I missed him very much. The train curved and sunlight fell against the window, obscuring the passing fields with a mesh of silver light." Notice the specificity there. "I closed my eyes against the glare and remembered the spider silk. I had walked all over it and had not seen it. I had not known it was there. It struck me then that perhaps the bareness and wrongness of the world was an illusion. That things might be real and right and beautiful even if I could not see them. That if I stood in the right place and was lucky, it might be somehow revealed to me." It goes on there, but notice she isn't just taking a train ride and thinking. You see what she sees out the window and you see more than that. You see concrete examples of her way of thinking and her way of seeing so that we really are inside of her mind and inside of her head. There's a little bit more. I want to talk about action and description at the same time weaving, which we've been doing a bit already. This is a real action scene. Page 182 and 183, I'll read pieces of it. She is chasing a pheasant. This is an interesting way to write about this, and I'm reading it for the specifics of what happens. "The pheasant crashes into the brambles beneath a tall hedge. She stands on top of the hedge—" Mabel does, "—peering down, her plumage bright against the dark earth of the slope. I start running. I think I remember where the pheasant has gone. Clay sticks to my heels and slows me down. I'm in a world of slowly freezing mud and even the air seems to be harder to run through." So she's running and then a couple of sentences later, "I'm crashing through the brambles and sticks, dimly aware of the catch and rip of thorns on my flesh. And now I can see the hawk and I have to work out what she is doing by putting myself in her mind. I become both the hawk in the branches above and the human below. The strangeness of this splitting makes me feel I am walking under myself and sometimes away from myself. For a moment, everything becomes dotted lines and the hawk, the pheasant, and I are merely elements in a trigonometry exercise, each labeled with soft italic letters." What a description. Wow. I get choked up about that kind of writing. She goes on and talks about the time slowing down, and so she is just so excellent at slowing our mind down and taking us into her world there and I felt that I was, again, hypnotized into this trigonometry set of lines and spaces and time. I really read it very slowly because I had to really work to make sense of it. But it was just so pleasurable when I first read that. I was like, I'm dying here, this is amazing.

BW: It is amazing. Man, reading this stuff out loud makes you realize how complex her sentences, are and her sentence structure. We'll move to the final slide. We're going to do Q&A and give you a little glimpse into next week, which is our final class. We'll take a look at some of the things that people are saying. A lot of notes when we're getting into the tenses that I thought were interesting. Britain and Jean in particular made a couple of points. Britain was

saying about her moving fluidly between tenses that it seems to work partly because she's dealing with a book, a man from the past, and because she's dealing with her long ago past as well as what feels to us as the present. It's hard to imagine it in other situations. I think it's a very interesting point and yet you can probably imagine people doing fluid tense changes if they're writing about any place in the past if they want to. Frank McCourt does it quite a bit and it's coming of age. Because he's young in the book, he's writing oftentimes in the past tense from his adult place, but it's still the "now" narrator as a young child. And then interestingly, he'll just move into the present. What the present does for a lot of people—Linda, I know that you also have written *Don't Call Me Mother* in the present. It gives a sense of immediacy and so a lot of people really prefer it. And so it's an interesting idea to think that you could be able to move fluidly back and forth, but it can also get a little tiring at times for the reader. That's my experience, anyway, that staying in present tense can be difficult and it's also hard to reflect from the present tense. Jean just shared this, which I'll share with everyone else. It's a quote: "Denoting a past action in progress but not completed at the time in question." You guys can see this in the questions window. This is an interesting part of the definition of imperfect tense.

LJM: Yeah, the "would." It's so interesting—usually when we're working with people—often, but not all the time—we're finding them using "would." "This would happen" when they're not necessarily talking about ongoing action or they're talking about ongoing action too much when it needs to be pinned down with real past tense and weaving past and past perfect tense. I love what you taught today about really thinking about tenses and maybe pushing your window as students and as writers, about thinking about what tense to use and when. And maybe not using present and past quite the way that Helen does, because she's so advanced, but really noticing when that shift might make something more powerful. Sometimes dropping in the present tense is the exact right thing to do. But just really make the choice about it.

BW: Yeah, it's interesting. Naomi has an interesting and different point of view: "Is that really good," she asks, "that you have to slow down to read it? Doesn't the writer lose the reader when the reader has to slow down to make sense?"

LJM: I didn't experience it that way because I was all excited about the way she was using language.

BW: I'll note that I didn't feel that way when I read it. Reading out loud is very different from reading normally, and I never felt overwhelmed or that I—a couple of times I definitely felt like I had to re-read a sentence. Interestingly, there were words I didn't understand, and that was a moment where I was like, oh, I have no idea what she's talking about. So yeah, you could lose the reader, but again, I gave her a little bit of leniency on that I guess because she's British. I guess I expected some of the words—and it's very interesting, because this is an American publisher, obviously, who published the American version of the book, but they didn't change the spellings. Normally they do. Like the "recognise"—I think they did in terms of the "-ours" words like "colours" and stuff like that—

LJM: And "favourite," yeah.

BW: Yeah, but I noticed they didn't change the "-ize" words, which is just an interesting choice. The whole book fascinates me, actually, in terms of everything from how it was published, its category being nature, the fact that it's a bestseller—it's an anomaly, for sure. It's really so brilliant.

LJM: We wanted to teach it partly because it does stretch the mind. I think we need to stretch our minds around what we can read. I read something recently about developing the brain. We're going to have a person speak about it at our November 6th NAMW telesummit—Susan Reynolds. She did a book on how to fire up your writing brain. One thing she said to do that I actually have been doing more often and more consciously, she said read things out of your comfort zone so that you have to work harder to understand them because it will develop your brain and develop new little branches and tendrils going on in your brain and keep you fired up in new ways. You have to stand out of your comfort zone to read this. This book isn't easy to read. It reminds me a little bit of *The Goldfinch*, which is a fictional book. It did win the Pulitzer prize, but it was a gigantic chunk of something to read and it was long and detailed about things that I'd be like, why am I reading this? But it was so well-written that I was completely woven into the fictive dream. I had to work hard to read it because it was really, really long, and pretty complicated and like where is she going with this? So those questions did keep me reading. Maybe some people don't enjoy reading that way and I certainly really do understand that. I pick other books to read if I want to go to sleep at night, like a Henry VIII-era book because I can be like, OK, I can just kind of hang out and not really work very hard. It's a very good point about how much do we want to push the reader to work hard in our book. I think you have to write that first draft and then another and another. And if all of your readers keep saying, you know what, I cannot follow you, it is too complicated, come on, give me a break, then you need to listen to that. You're going to get peer readers to read your book and give you some feedback. But don't be afraid of it either. See what you need to do in your own book.

BW: There are some good comments here that I'll read aloud in case people can't see them. Jean says, "Memoir is so much process as well as linear. Helen is so masterful at taking us on the circle of that process, of backing up and spiraling through it and whirling around before moving on. I love her ability to do this. It's what I've been wanting to do myself." That's awesome and thank you for that comment, Jean. And then Rachel says, "Helen uses both past and present tense for the 'now,' but specifically uses present tense when she's especially focused, mostly with Mabel. It makes us focused too." And that's right. I think it does make us focus. If you're paying attention, you kind of go, oh, interesting, now she's in a different space. She also uses the present tense in a very interesting way with the T.H. White stuff, I noticed. Occasionally she will move into saying something about T.H. White from the present and she's recreating his world. She's taking a major leap into fiction when she does that because she's reimagining, but it's done from research and so it's creative nonfiction. But there are moments of present there as well.

LJM: I was reading some White passages while you were teaching that section because I ran into one of them and I was like, oh my gosh, she's doing present, past, present, past, all the way through the White sections too. Fascinating. But for people who are working on it—and Brooke and I said this before—really be paying good, structured attention to when you're choosing to do those and make it a choice, not just, "I just happened to accidentally write it that way," because you'll get just really frustrated later because you'll get confused. Keep an eye out.

BW: Exactly. And Dana is just encouraging everyone to check out some interviews with Helen on YouTube, which is always a good thing to do and I did look at a lot of interviews for Mary Karr when we were teaching Mary Karr. I think that's a great—

LJM: Let's talk about some of that next week. That'll be good.

BW: Yeah, that's a good idea. Rachel is saying, "Do we know of any memoirs written in present tense? Perhaps with flashback and memory in past tense?" The book that we taught in Mastering Memoir, the one that's a braided memoir, I'm just forgetting the name off the top of my head.

LJM: *The Color of Water*?

BW: No, it was the other African-American author. Something like *Picket Fences*. I'll have to find it. I'll send it out if I can find it, because he writes alternating back and forth and one of the whole sections is done in the present tense and I'm just forgetting his name off the top of my head. But then there's also Jennifer Lauck. *Blackbird* is written in the present tense.

LJM: Yes, all the way through.

BW: And that is a coming of age book. It was an Oprah pick back in the day, a bestseller, and an interesting one to look at. I don't know if she has flashbacks. I don't think so.

LJM: No, it's straight ahead in the now, now, now of every given moment.

BW: And it works. It works really well. So that's something to check out for sure. Oh, excuse me, I found it. It's *Raising Fences* by Michael Datcher. I'll put that in the window. It's a black man's love story—I thought this was a fascinating book and very interesting in its structure and also it's good to look at for tenses. I think we're at the end of our time. Thank you, everyone, and we'll be back next week for the journey of personal transformation. I'm very much looking forward to our final class.

LJM: Yeah, me too. It'll be a good one on that subject—one of our favorite subjects, also. Have a great week, everybody.

BW: Goodnight.

LJM: Goodnight.

Class 4. The Journey of Personal Transformation in Memoir

Brooke Warner: Class number four. Hi, everybody. Here we are. Final class of *H Is for Hawk*, so thank you all for joining us. This has been an interesting class to teach because we've gotten some feedback from people on the free call and again even in the class from people who have signed up who found this book really difficult. It's complicated and it's somewhat complicated to teach, too, and yet it's something to be celebrated and we hope that from having taken the course maybe you'll go back and read the book again. I also want to say that Britain e-mailed me to say that she has listened to the audio and that Helen does it herself.

Linda Joy Myers: Oh my gosh. That would be great.

BW: So for those of you really wanting to immerse yourself in it, that might be a really cool thing to do.

LJM: That actually sounds very interesting to do.

BW: Yeah, I know. It would be wonderful for a road trip or something like that.

LJM: Obsession. I agree that it's complicated and it's a complex book. As we say here, layering the themes and the threads creates complexity and immerses the reader in each theme. It includes all of these things, so therefore your brain is trying to process each of these threads and then there are sub-threads to the threads which we've touched on in other classes. But the story of loss, which is Helen's obsession, and finding and training Mabel clearly—you find out earlier in the story that she's obsessed with hawks, which we've already talked about many of these things before. It's seeded very early in the first 20 or 30 pages of the book. Within a few pages, we also learn about White—that she read him when she was a child and then later we drop into his point of view, which I'm going to mention some of these places in just a minute. Just the overview of this arc—all the way through we have White's story. He's an outsider like Helen has always been. She characterizes herself earlier as an outsider in the world—being different, being unusual, being a weird kid who is interested in hawks, who goes to sleep with her arms behind her back like wings. If you recall, we talked about that in one of the earlier classes. And how his story of loss is tracked—she tracks it all the way through—and the parallel to her story of loss. Already, we have all of these threads. And then we thought it was interesting—I'm interested in history and Brooke is too, so to me it was quite fascinating having studied a bit of English history myself and going to England and tracking some history there by being in the place where certain things happened. She's tracking history of hawking throughout the entire book. There are times when she drops into certain moments in history, both in her point of view and in White's. I'm just going to touch on some of these specifics a bit. You've heard parts of it before, but I would like to just start on page 22 and mention the—it starts on page 21, 22, 23—she goes into the history of hawking. She lays this groundwork so very early in the book. Of course, you don't know when you're reading it the first time how that is going to be a thread throughout, but she places it in early. I do not know how she kept track of all this stuff. I'd like to see if there's any

kind of discussion about that somewhere in her discussions about the book. She seeds the history of Britain there and then she pulls the thread in many places. I'm only going to touch on a few because we can't possibly cover them all. But it is woven all the way through, like what we talk about. On page 158 and 159, she's talking about the history of the—well, it's current time also—she's talking about the Northwest Passages are open, the permafrost is melting—I read that last week. And then she's talking about—reminding us about the history of the Berlin Wall falling and the Cold War and the way that the land and the history all weave together and gets all the way up to the meaning of the word "game." She defines that and brings it into life. In small ways, in this section, she arcs from history to now and ends it in this description. Again, it's something we've read before. "Every part of her—" This is Mabel. "—was boiling with life as if you could see a plume of steam around her, coiling and ascending and making everything around her slightly blurred. The hawk was a fire that burned my hurts away. There was no regret or mourning in her. No past or future. She lived in the present only and that was my refuge." She pulls out of history and gets into the now. In my part two that I talk about—it's hard to talk about all these things separately because they weave together, but I see that as a healing metaphor to jump out of the history and into the now in that particular moment. In different places she talks about her obsession with the hawking equipment, like on page 47 where she lists all the bits of equipment. Those are—we need them as readers. We need to learn about what her world is. She puts in the necessary elements of the world that she's in. And then on page 94, there's more history. Again, it's the history of the world, the history of hawking, and specific things about the different kinds of hoods. "Syrian hoods, Turkmen hoods, Afghan hoods, tiny Indian hoods and snakeskin for shikras and sparrow hawks. Huge eagle hoods from central Asia. Sixteenth century French hoods cut from white kidskin, embroidered with golden thread and painted with coats of arms. They're not a European invention. Frankish knights learned how to use hoods from Arab falconers during the crusades." She's talking about King Philip I of Spain and Solodon and all this—wow. She goes into some depth there. This is on page 94 again and into page 95. Again, the history of the world, not just the history of Britain. And then there's White. Early on, she seeds White. First she seeds that she loved reading him and she starts describing him. The chapter is called "Mr. White," where she drops into his life. It is March 16, 1936 and he's at Stowe, the school where he's teaching. Then she begins to characterize him and describe him. On page 36, "He looked a little like Byron. He was tall, with full lips and very pale blue eyes, a trimmed red mustache, and dark, unruly hair. He did all the right things. He flew airplanes, shot, fished for salmon, hunted. And even better, all the wrong things: kept grass snakes in his room, rode his horse up the school steps," and so on. So she begins to characterize him there and on the next page, she gives some of the history of the abuse that he went through, which begins to lead us to understand very quickly in the book how he's this outsider that I had mentioned earlier. All the way through the whole book, we learn about White and I thought it was very important to realize—on page 43, in the middle of the page, "When White dreamed of the hawk, his false self was cracking under the strain. He felt himself boiling with the strange unrest." She's quoting his diary. She uses his own words to help both characterize him and his obsession and she analyzes him a bit. The whole peril of all of that with her life is what weaves together all the way through, all the way to the end when he loses his goshawk and she is grief-stricken as well with him. Her story is different. Then there's the arc of Mabel herself—the hawk. There are many places, again, that she's introduced. On page 107 in the chapter "Outlaws," she characterizes Mabel and now that she's actually training her, they've gone beyond meeting, beyond the first bit of getting acquainted and she's training her. She says, "Now

she is cross. She paces up and down. She stamps and grips her perch. Her black feathered mustache is hardened into frown lines down her jaw and I can feel her bristling. She snakes her head from side to side. Something is changing in her. I sense it with a shiver. It's as if the room is darkening, contracting to a point. Then something happens." And then the hawk flies onto her glove, which is what she's been training her to do. The way she characterizes the hawk, again, is very alive and it's all the way through. Page 179, which I'm not going to read but it's another place where I thought it was interesting the way she characterized her. We're looking at arcs here and so all the way to page 237, and again, part of the characterization is in action. That's just quite a powerful scene, where Mabel is hunting pheasants. "I hear them running. I see one, two, three, crouching in mortal terror. Then a blue-rumped cock pheasant burning copper against the leaves kicked up behind him, running hell for shelter along the ground 30 feet away. Mabel comes up behind him like a gust of wind carrying the angel of death. I can't stop this. Nothing can." And goes on: "Leaves fly, feathers fly, pheasant wings batter, and I'm running." There's lots of amazing verbs: stamp, gripe, stamp, clutch, stamp, and she uses these like bullet-like ways of describing the action after the part that I just read a minute ago. Again, we're all the way through most of the book as she's doing this. Briefly, I will just mention—talking about the father as well. The arc about the father—he has his own arc, as I've been describing with Mabel and Helen as well. The father's arc is very, very early, before he dies. And then right after he dies she's describing these places of his childhood and she weaves him all the way through both his own history and certain moments of the history of England, starting on page 62 to 63. That's one place where she does it. She talks about dreaming about her father and the dream is this bomb site in Shepherd's Bush where he would run wild as a boy. Then later, much later, he's at Biggin Hill, which is a well-known base during World War II. "There he is, a boy standing by a fence, staring up at the sky. He's at an aerodrome, Biggin Hill, spotting RAF planes, and he's taking pictures." She likens his picture-taking and the knowledge of the shape of the planes with her ability to spot what birds and especially hawks look like up in the sky. She makes this parallel between herself and her father, which I thought was really very beautiful. Anything else? There is so much going on here, obviously.

BW: Yeah, there is a lot going on. I have all my own ground to cover, so I will just segue in. We are talking about arc and Linda Joy was talking about one of the arcs—or multiple arcs, rather. But what's interesting about what Helen is doing is she is tracking multiple arcs. I'm going to be talking about the through threads of all the characters in my next section. In this one, I wanted to talk about the ascension of grief. Partly what we've already talked about, and also for you guy to help your reader track your own emotional arc. One thing that Helen does brilliantly is she's always telling you how she's feeling about things or showing you how she's feeling about things. She is very consistent in her language around the grief and the stages of grief and what she's doing. So even though she doesn't explicitly name the stages of grief, except for one time in the whole memoir, it's clear that there are moments where she is speaking to the stages of grief if you're actually looking for it. I wanted to name some of those places so that you guys can see. To the extent to which Helen sat down and is like, my arc is going to be the stages of grief—yes, maybe, maybe not. She's clearly aware of these different stages and she's going to do it so explicitly as to be cumbersome, but she definitely touches upon all of these stages and I think it's an interesting thing to look at because these are the things that people go through when they experience profound grief. So I wanted to look at this particular arc. You guys will need to find whatever your own arc is, and sometimes it is something that is a device or a structure. I know

people who have written memoirs that are the hero's journey, and again it could be more or less explicit. But some people do stuff like—I have an author who divided her book into three parts: mind, body, and spirit. And then she figured out which chapters needed to go in there in order to make an arc that made sense for her book. So there's just a lot of things that you can use to help you create an arc that makes sense. Let me share some of the places where she has denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Early on, there is denial on page 16. This is something that lots of people write about, including Joan Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking* where you see the person. Toward the bottom it says, "Sometimes, a few times, I felt my father must be sitting near me as I sat in a train station or in a café. It was comforting. It all was. Because these were the normal madnesses of grief. I learned this from the book. I bought books on grieving and loss and bereavement. They spilled over my desk," et cetera, et cetera. In this case, I guess she just feels this presence, which is a little different than seeing him in the streets. But it's interesting, because she does seed this idea that she read all the books. To give another example—or a different example, rather—here is one of bargaining. This is what bargaining looks like. On page 106, she's realizing for the first time that she'll never see her father again and she's yelling at the bottom of the first paragraph. "It wasn't until we were talking toward the exit that I realized for the first time I would never see my father again ever. I stopped dead and I shouted. I called out loud for him, 'Dad!' And then the word 'No!' came out in one long, collapsing howl." Whether that's bargaining or acceptance is up for debate, but what's interesting about bargaining is she's not saying "I'm bargaining," but there's a moment where she also talks about bargaining. Later on when she actually does name the stages of grief, on page 220 at the top of the page, it says, "Melanie Klein wrote that children go through states of mind comparable to mourning." That's not the stages of grief, excuse me. Clearly she's referencing different books that she's read. I'm extrapolating a little bit here, but at the end it says—she's talking about Gos, who is lost. And she says, "He could only be lost. He was out there still, somewhere out there in that tangled wood with all the rest of the lost and dead. I know now what those dreams in spring had meant." She's recalling dreams she had earlier in the year. "The ones of a hawk slipping through a rent in the air into another world. I'd wanted to fly with the hawk to find my father. Find him and bring him home." Again, I may be stretching a little bit to call that bargaining, but it is this moment where you're making a bargain with reality. She could not have brought him home, but she had this impulse to do so. I think these are just interesting moments to look at how she's tracking things for you. She moves into another instance of denial. This one was quite profound, actually, and I'm sorry that I'm kind of jumping all over the place, but this one is on page 182. She goes into the hospital room and again, these are reflections. Her father is long dead—or many months dead, anyway—by this point. So she's thinking back. At the top of the page between the first two paragraphs here, it says, "And I think of the day after my father died when I was shown into the hospital room where he lay. But this isn't him, I thought wildly after the woman closed the door. He isn't here. Someone has dressed a waxwork of my father in hospital pajamas and a patterned duvet. Why would they do that? It made no sense. It was nonsense. I took a step back." That is obviously denial, but she's showcasing all of these things and I think they're really interesting to look at in terms of this ascension. I believe that she used this device on purpose and that she's looking explicitly for things that readers can relate to in talking about her grief. And the depression is sort of omnipresent. I'm not going to go into it too much—there's so much about her depression and we've spoken already to her acceptance, which was particularly strong starting from the point of the memorial chapter toward the end all the way to the end of the book where she really does

explicitly talk about coming to a point of acceptance being at this memorial service, being with the people, coming back to the world. So this arc is so strong and again, I'd love to be able to ask Helen this question about the stages of grief and whether she thought about that as she was going. But having something like that in your back pocket can help you to have a structure that gives a bit of an arc. The acceptance piece comes quite late in the game, so in a traditional arc—which if you guys want to go and google "arc" and see what is out there about arc, you will come across an image that shows the ascension and that the arc—the climax—is usually about ¾ of the way into the book or even later. And then the denouement, which is like the end and the resolution, is really at the very end. So you're building, building, building up to the climax point for almost the whole book and then you have a relatively short resolution period. Here when I'm talking about tracking your own arc, that's what it is. It's that these conflicts happen—these crises and tension points happen as you build, build, build to a point of climax, and then you have resolution. I have asked the question here, what is it and when do you need to know what you're doing and where you're going with it? It's up to you to figure out when you need to know what you need to know when you write your memoir. But it is very helpful, particularly if you're in a stuck point, to pull back a bit and to ask yourself if there even is an arc or if there is a structure that you're working with or if you're just writing into the void. Because this is not what this class is about, per se, but Linda Joy and I when we teach our longer classes, we're talking a bit about the muddy middle and why people get stuck. I think a lot of people who join our classes are in the muddy middle. They kind of can't see the forest through the trees anymore and they're not quite sure where they're going. A lot of that is because they've gotten to that middle point and they don't have a sense of where their climax is. They don't exactly know what their resolution is because they have not figured it out or there isn't an end point in mind that they've made a decision about. So usually in the muddy middle is the time to bring yourself back, to pull out, to get that view from a thousand miles above and to try to figure out, do you have an arc? Can you create an arc? And to do some real structure work which means outlining, which means making some decisions, and that really sucks for a lot of people. It's not exactly fun for everyone; some people like it. If you've been avoiding it, then figuring out what your arc is and giving yourself some structure to write into is a real gift to yourself.

LJM: That's good. I'm going to talk more generally—I could pin down all of these moments. I'll give you a couple of them, but I want to talk about how to think about these healing metaphors of land and history. As you know, we've touched on it before, how the land is a character all the way through and it's through the different points of view of Helen and White and even her father—you don't exactly go into his head, but there are scenes where we are in this English landscape with him. I think what comes across is that Helen loves England. She never says it. She writes these places with such specificity that it is a character, which we've talked about in other classes. It feels like in the landscapes themselves that she is in, she is grounded and she's in a certain kind of reality that is very helpful to her in her grief. I will mention a few—one of them is on page 118. She's talking about—she has Mabel; she's begun to train her. And then she says this: "The light is thickening into real dusk and it starts to rain. And with the rain and the dusk comes the smell of autumn. It makes me shiver happily but I have no idea what amazement is still to come, because Mabel and I are about to witness an extraordinary phenomenon—an evening ritual. I had no idea it existed until today. Joggers." She goes into describing the way the joggers look. "They're like bats leaving their roost. First there's one or two, and then another one, and then three. Herds of them. We stand there in the gloom and watch

the runners come up and split and stream past us. It's raining quite hard now and the hawk's flat head is beaded with tiny gems of water that glow in the light from sodium lamps. She balances on the balls of her feet as she does when she's calm." I think this—it goes on a little further, but the very ending of that chapter, Helen is happy. She has many more challenges to go through, but she's already been agonizing on Mabel. Is she training her properly? Is she OK? She's been somewhat traumatized by the fact that White's goshawk was lost at the end of that book. She's trying to do something different than White. So in that struggle, she's looking at her own layers of healing in different ways. So there's her healing from her father's death and her wanting to do better than White did because she says later in the book that the loss of Gos helped destroy White in certain ways. His depression and his sorrow and his outsiderness and his inability to train his hawk properly for whatever reason—she doesn't know why exactly, of course—contributed to his depression. So he doesn't really come out all that healed. How he handled his healing is to write *The Once and Future King* and *The Sword in the Stone* and another book. I think there are four books in which goshawks are characters. So that is explicitly woven, especially toward the end as you find out the end of White's story. The descriptions of the land—again, all the way through from the very beginning—we are grounded in Britain where Helen lives, where Helen is losing her father immediately. She's on a hike right before she gets this phone call. She takes Mabel out into this landscape and they struggle in the landscape, in the weather, in all the different things. And there are so many moments of beauty, many of which we have read to you already, where she's exalting in these particular moments. We also learn—and I'm reminded many times, but like on page 206, her father taught her how to be patient and taught her how to sit in a landscape and wait for something to happen. So his teaching as well as her mourning of him occurs in these moments outside and she brings him back in. Again, we're not totally sure how Helen did all of this, because it is so complex, of course. I believe that she wrote probably quite a few drafts and dealt with all of these things perhaps in layers, but I really don't know. I hope to find out more. There are some interviews that I have yet to read. But Helen is an academic and she cares very much about history, as we've mentioned. She does give everything in the context of history, all the way from the history of training goshawks—page 47—going back to the 14th century. Later we were hearing about the hoods that I just read an example of. And we're learning about the hawking that White would have known about. For instance, on page 76 and 77 we're reading about what he would have known at his time, because he was quite a few years earlier than Helen having her hawk. I really like the way she did this. On page 76, in the middle of the page, she says, "White read that falconry was the art of control over the wildest and proudest of living creatures, and that to train them, the falconer must battle their defiance and rebellious attitude. The training of a hawk mirrored the education of the public schoolboy. In both, a wild and unruly subject was shaped and molded and made civilized, was taught good manners and obedience. But the methods were different." It's well known that most English schoolboys were beaten a lot and obviously traumatized by that. At the bottom of that page, she talks about a book that White titled *The Austringer*, which means the falconer. "In its pages, he and his readers would take a 'patient excursion into the fields and back into the past.' That excursion wasn't just an imagined English past. It was a journey back into his own. He became again a monastic boy. In those long hours of psychoanalysis White had with Bennett, White had learned that going back in time was a way of fixing things, uncovering past traumas and revisiting them and diffusing their power. Now he was going back in time with the hawk." Of course, so does Helen. And you already know this, but in the weaving of the history of hawking and White's history, we've already discussed how she is merging with him and how these

journeys parallel. As you read it or perhaps re-read it, I've found that reading it a second and third time was very helpful.

BW: It's interesting to look back over it and see what pops out. I'm going to be talking about the character arcs here. Helen's own arc we've talked about in previous sessions, so I'm not going to go into it in too much detail here. But obviously her own arc is part of what we've addressed, this grief that she descends into and comes out of. Linda Joy just mentioned the word merging, and I think she merges with T.H. White and she merges with Mabel. So to some extent, their arcs are her arcs. That is very interesting to look at. T.H. White's may be almost more interesting than Mabel's in some way. That's probably because he's a human and Mabel is a bird. He is a little more complex in that sense. But I am going to start with T.H. White because I think that what I wrote here is sort of interesting to look at, which is that she at once admires and despises him. There's quite a bit of condemnation even though she—it's an interesting thing she manages to pull off, which is that I don't think she comes off as judgmental of him. And yet she's angry with him in lots of different instances about what he did and how he trained his hawk, and then part of her is sort of saying, well, he's so messed up. It was inevitable. In other places, I think she's letting him a little bit off the hook because of the era in which he grew up. So that I found to be interesting as I was reading through. I'd like to track his arc a little bit. And I also want to show—because she does this point of view stuff—where she tells you she's going to do it. I thought that was part of the interesting thing of when she introduces us to him. On the bottom of page 38 she says, "The book you are reading is my story. It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White, but White is a part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there. When I trained my hawk, I was having a quiet conversation of sorts with the deeds and works of a long-dead man who was suspicious, morose, determined to despair. A man whose life disturbed me." And then she goes on.

LJM: What page was that, Brooke?

BW: That's page 38. I found this—she sets up very much here in the beginning how she feels about him, and then she continues to move on and to describe things that she is disturbed by. I found it fascinating, actually, to track his arc in particular. On page 80 she basically talks about his own—there are lots of times where she talks about his madness. Right before the line break on page 80 it says, "White was engaged in a battle to civilize the perversity and unruliness within himself. Only now he had put those things into the hawk and he was trying to civilize them there. He found himself in a strange, locked battle with a bird that was all the things he longed for but had always fought against. It was a terrible paradox; a proper tragedy. No wonder living with Gos brought him to nearly madness." That was fascinating. Again, I just found it very interesting to watch how she wrote about him in a way that showcased his complexity but really spared him nothing. She does it throughout. Even when she's a young girl on page 154, she's having a flashback and she's talking about how angry she was when she first read his book. It says in the second paragraph, "I think now that White's quest for the hawks was his final test of Gos. He was behaving like a fearful man who has finally won someone's love, unsure of whether that love can be trusted, decides it is safer to fuss about someone else. But when I was small, his actions were incomprehensible. 'Why?' I'd howled. Why did he abandon his goshawk? I would have never done that." Again, she's really psychoanalyzing him here, saying he's a fearful man, that he is obsessed, and yet then when she shows herself—when she paints her own obsession—

she's hardly trying to paint a pretty picture. While she's not particularly gentle with T.H. White nor does he need that from her, she's also not with herself. She really lays it all bare. So their arcs are in fact quite similar, although he is perhaps a more unlikable character. Later you see that he doesn't really like people, he is a fascist and a racist—there were some real flaws, undoubtedly. And then she sympathizes with him, which I thought was interesting. She talks about his upbringing and on page 161 she asks this question at the bottom: "What must it be like to live in a world where you cry because you believe your father will kill you on your birthday? A world in which you are beaten daily for no reason. A world in which you write a letter to your mother in India, enclosing your school photograph, and she writes back to tell you that your lips are growing sensual and that you should hold them in with your teeth if necessary. I cannot imagine White's childhood of terror and shame, but I can understand how it made him see the world as controlled by cruelty, by dictators and madmen. I can see how that powerless child in front of the play castle never quite stopped believing that he was going to be shot." That's powerful, obviously, and it's also sympathetic—or at least empathetic—to why he turned out the way he did. In some ways, he was abusive to his hawk and she is pissed off about that in certain instances and can't understand—I guess I shouldn't say can't understand. I mean forces herself to understand why he is the way that he is. So that is interesting. And she showcases—this will be the final one that I share about T.H. She showcases his own understanding, I guess, of what happened with his hawking by showing it through the letter of someone else. This is on pages 273 and 274. At the bottom of page 273, "When *The Goshawk* was published in 1951, it was not a bestseller, but it brought an extraordinary number of letters from readers. Some were congratulatory, others strange. Some disliked the book greatly. And one of these letters White never forgot. It touched a raw nerve. It was from a man who said he had for 30 years lectured on birds and watched them all his life. 'How can you talk of a love for a bird after subjecting our wonderful predatory birds to such torture is beyond a normal mind. Is there not enough cruelty in the world without adding to it for one's amusement or hobby?'" And then she talks about White's reaction to that. Clearly, in his own lifetime, he got feedback about what he chose to put into his book and what's interesting about that is that it was an early memoir. Even back in the '30s, people were criticizing memoirists for things that they did and to some extent maybe even writing something that might be akin to hate mail. I think that his arc is very interesting, and how she writes about him is particularly fascinating, and I would argue almost unprecedented in the world of memoir. I have not seen another memoir that deigns to go into the point of view of someone in the way that she's done and fully reimagine his history, to some extent, although obviously it's very research-based. It's fascinating and she does it quite well. The secondary characters—although Mabel is a primary character, her arc is basically just the arc of her training. What's more interesting about Mabel is how Helen merges with her. I wrote here, she is like a parent to her at some times and other times she is one with Mabel. She's merged with Mabel. I've shared lots of examples over this course where she talks about becoming the hawk. I think that that's really part of it. Her own descent into madness, in some ways, is becoming a hawk and becoming not like Mabel, actually, but just free and wild. And Mabel's own arc, it's like she starts in the house and then little by little she takes her out and I think what's interesting about Mabel is that once she's out in the world, of course she's wild and she wants to be wild. So on the bottom of page 182, Helen writes, "The next day, out on the hill, Mabel learns, I suppose, what she is for." And then she talks about what she does and it's essentially hunting. And then the arc of their hunting together escalates into finally where she nearly loses Mabel but doesn't, but she begins to definitely push the envelope of letting Mabel be free and be on her own. The

page that I feel Helen sort of talks about her as if she were her child is on page 241, the very final paragraph that says, "And now I'm giving Mabel her head, letting her fly where she wants. I've discovered something rather wonderful. She is building a landscape of magical places too. She makes a detour to check particular spots in case a rabbit or the pheasant that was there last week might be there again. It is wild superstition, as it is an instinctive characteristic of the hunting mind and it works. She is learning a particular way of navigating the world and her map is coincident with mine. Memory and love and magic. What happened over the years of my expeditions as a child was a slow transformation of my landscape over time into what naturalists call a local patch, glowing with memory and meaning. Mabel is doing the same. She is making the hill her own, mine, ours." It's really interesting. The dynamic is fascinating between all of these characters and her. The dad's I'm going to not talk about too much except to say that the arc, of course, is mainly in memory and not very much. The picture that is painted is just this gentle man who is patient, who she adores. Because she talks about him so sparingly, I didn't feel that she put him on a pedestal. I just feel that she was trying to reconcile his death. Sometimes in books like this, when someone is grieving the loss of a parent they can make the character very one-dimensional. In this case, because there's really so little about her father—just dreams and the eulogy that she gives at his memorial and a few sporadic memories of him—we just get a little glimpse of who he was. It's touching. That's all. He does not need to be, nor is he in this book a complex character. He's just someone she adores, and that works very well for this book. The point of all of this is to say that if you have these primary characters—and even in the case of her father, secondary characters—you need to track everyone's arc. Everyone matters and she clearly would have put a lot of attention into that. Let me take this question from Eli, because it's pertinent to this. It says, "Could you speak to what she writes in the memorial, page 217 and 218: 'I thought that to heal my great hurt, I should flee to the wild.' And then in the next paragraph she writes, 'Now I knew this for what it was: a beguiling but dangerous lie.' And then next, 'Hands are for other human hands to hold.' Do you see that she debunks the myth?" I think that what she's talking about here—I really loved this part. It was like she was reconciling. She lost herself to despair, to madness, although in the beginning of the book she says, "I don't think I went quite mad." She does so by basically merging with the hawk and isolating herself from human existence and becoming wild and kind of being in this space of—I really think that what happened was that she lost control. And yet she's training this hawk, she's doing this thing, she's becoming quite obsessed, and so she says she's running away from it. And there's this early part that I referenced several times in our courses when she talks about escaping. Where it says sometimes grief causes us to want to escape. I'll try to find that. She sets it up that she tried to escape from herself, from society—here it is, on page 46. "When you are broken, you run, but you don't always run away. Sometimes, helplessly, you run towards." In this case, I think she's talking about this sort of trying to recapture something or figure something out. It's somewhat elusive. And then she realizes, like she says here, it was a beguiling and dangerous lie. She didn't have to do all of that; it was not bringing her closer to her father. Your thoughts on that, Linda Joy?

LJM: The thing that I think makes it so interesting and challenging is the very deeply psychological, Brooke, where we are following both hers and White's struggle with inner conflicts. So we're following her desire to heal and to be transformed and there were times in this book where I was like, oh my gosh, she's really falling apart—the parts where White is also falling apart. But I saw the metaphor and the parallel to the wildness and the chaos of nature

itself and that you can't control all these things. You can try to train your hawk as best you can, but in the end I think the biggest message is when do you surrender to what is? White couldn't and she makes that point. He couldn't. He was trying to control too much and she was trying to figure it out too. I just thought there were so many layers to what the conflicts and struggles were about. It wasn't just about healing itself from grief, it was also about how you look at life—all of life. That's what I got out of it.

BW: We'll get to the rest of the questions after this, but we want to quickly notify you. We have alumni here and we have people who are in our class right now, so I don't want to take too much time on this, but we always like to make this offer and it's part of why we do our short courses is to seed some ideas from our longer course. So we invite you guys to join us both, although I got the dates wrong and I apologize for that. I cut and pasted this. So the dates are not July 1 to December, but January to June. The orientation is in December and the class starts January and ends in June—it's six months. When you register to do these short courses you get 200 dollars off. So you sign up just by going to Program Details on our site and putting in a deposit. As of today, we actually only have three spots left. So if it's something that you're interested in and you want to talk to either of us about it, please let us know. We would love to have that conversation with you. Anything you would like to add, Linda?

LJM: Well, we could put the correct range of dates in the e-mail that they're going to get also, but it is correct on the website. I can find it there.

BW: The accurate dates are there. That is the gist of it. We cover craft and process and the syllabus is there, so we invite you to take a look and to consider it.

LJM: I will say one thing, though, about why I think it's valuable. We both do a lot of coaching and we also did this recent—probably you heard about our recent conference. I just spoke at another conference and what I always come away with is being impressed with how much people need these courses on craft and what a difference it makes. So I'm just so thrilled to be continuing to teach this with you, Brooke.

BW: Me too. Thank you so much. Let me answer Cora's question. She asks, "Would you say that Helen uses grief as an antagonist?" That is a very interesting question.

LJM: Yeah, it's so painful. It's interesting. It's like how can I feel better—but I don't think so directly. But it could be implied that the psychological state of just body-crushing grief is—it's so debilitating that you want to do something about it, and in that sense to create some kind of change and alteration psychologically. I think it could be seen that way—in a different way than the word "antagonist" is usually used.

BW: I think it's a super interesting observation and it's one of the things that we can look at when we analyze books at this level. We can start to wonder about things and how does she do what she does and to think—we've talked in previous classes, like when we taught *Eat, Pray, Love*, that countries and cities themselves were characters. So you're sort of pointing to a similar kind of thing, which is can an emotion be a character? I absolutely think it can be. I worked on a book at Seal Press—the title was *Pissed Off*. It was about anger. It was a memoir about anger,

and in that memoir the author—I would argue that the emotion was a character. I think it's a wonderful observation, Cora. Thank you. Anyone else have any specific insights or if you have any questions about the course or thoughts to share, we welcome that. And if not, then we're going to wrap up class today. One thing that I will also say is that we welcome your feedback about what we might teach next. We're doing these four-week classes twice a year—once in the spring and once in the fall. We want to know what people want. So if you want to e-mail us that feedback, we welcome it.

LJM: Yeah, it would be great to find out what people are reading or wanting to read or wanting to dig more deeply in to and how to learn more craft from some of these bestselling memoirs that we've been drawing from.

BW: And we're always looking at that question and encourage you to as well, which is when you're reading to think about what are they doing well? What do I admire? What can I bring more fully to the picture in my own memoir?

LJM: I'm always learning from reading new memoirs. I read all kinds, if you can imagine. And I love to read good fiction, too. I'm reading a book now called *The Orphan Train*, which is very well-known; I just haven't gotten around to it until now. Writing very psychologically about what it's like to be an abandoned child, and in working with someone who's writing about abandonment, I was noticing the parallels between that fictional book and this author's work, which was actually very well-done. So I think we bring what we're reading into what we're learning, whatever it might be, if it's well-written.

BW: Absolutely. All right, then. Thank you, everyone. We were thrilled to have you on these four weeks and we appreciate your attendance and attention. We hope to see you out there in the world and in a future class.

LJM: Thank you all so much for joining us. It's been a real pleasure to teach this with you.

BW: Goodnight, Linda. Always a pleasure. Thank you.

LJM: Thank you. Bye bye.