Evolution of Memoir

A 4-Week Course with
Linda Joy Myers & Brooke Warner

National Association of Memoir Writers

Write Your Memoir in Six Months
AN EXCLUSIVE AUTHOR MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

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Class 1: Elevating the Form

Hello from Brooke. And I'm Linda Joy Myers, the founder and president of the National Association of Memoir Writers. author of several memoirs and how-to's, which I will not go into detail about, but you can find it on my website, lindajjoymyersauthor.com. Brooke and I have been teaching together for 13 years, the Write Your Memoir in Six Months program. Week

I'm Brooke Warner. I love teaching with Linda Joy. A lot of you have taken our classes and all kinds of capacities for those of you who haven't—welcome. I come to memoir from the publishing side. I'm the publisher of She Writes Press and coach a lot of memoir, publish a lot of memoir and yes, we've been teaching together for 13 years.

This is an exciting class for us because we're doing something new. I feel that the evolution of memoir is somewhat revolutionary. We have some really great content and are just putting our finger on the pulse of so many changes that we're seeing in memoir, which I think Linda Joy also speaks to how much memoir is being written.

Linda Joy: Yes, and in so many different forms, which is what got us all excited. So it's evolution and revolution. All right. Let's get to it. We have a lot of content. What we want to share too is just the setup tonight that the first hour is teaching and Q and A at the end.

And then we're going to transition into writing. Some people said what is generative writing. That is what we call free writing. It's writing your memoir. It's practicing the stuff that we're talking about tonight, whatever you want it to be.

Starting out, we're talking about structure. A lot of you saw the email that we're covering structure form and style, lots and lots to cover within that space. And just want to say, we will always champion a linear narrative.

It's very interesting to me because, maybe nine, ten years ago, people in our classes, especially people coming out of MFA classes would sometimes poo-poo the linear

narrative or say “Oh, it's too simple. I want to do something much more complex.” And we've always said that for a first-time memoirist, a linear narrative is actually useful.

It’s always going to be a beautiful structure. I just want to say that this is not about upending your writing, it's about giving you permission to think more broadly. And if you're going to write a linear narrative, this class is not here to dissuade you from that. It's more to talk about all the new things that are happening, some of which are very exciting and some of which you can integrate into a semi-linear narrative. We want to make sure you understand where we're coming from.

Brooke: Yes, we're not ever going to be the memoir teachers who say that a linear narrative is problematic. That said, there's more out there. It’s just good to know about. What happened for me is that I started writing a linear narrative and then I read Maggie Smith's book, *You Could Make this Place Beautiful* and I loved what she was doing. It just opened my own horizons to what might be possible. And so that's what was the inspiration, and Linda Joy has her own inspiration. We're bringing several other books to look and say wow, what's happening with this genre? It's actually quite exciting.

The associative form: I'm going to go over three structures that are nonlinear in nature and talk through how they work and how to think about them. The associative structure is really about your associations. That's why it's called associative. And the idea of the steppingstones in the image on the screen is to imagine many more steppingstones, not just linear ones. You could take any stone across any river at any place, and that's how associative works.

In your mind, you have a scene that reminds you of another scene and you may move back and forth. You time travel with associative because you really can move almost anywhere in time. And for that reason, it's quite incumbent on you that you do not lose your reader completely. Time is quite important in associative memoir and tethering things together. Stitching things together is quite important when you're writing nonlinear narratives.

It doesn't mean you get to just abandon your timeline. If anything, you have to be even more mindful of it. I read Jane Allison's *Meander, Spiral, Explode* in preparation for this class and found it brilliant. It's for fiction writers and there's a lot to apply to memoir. I do highly recommend reading it because I think it will add to your understanding of what we're talking about.

And for this class, because we're teaching these six books, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Imani Perry's *Breathe* fall into the associative categories. As you're thinking through structure and how we're teaching keep that in mind as well.

Next: Fragmented. This is the one that we're seeing most often now, in terms of my reading experience, and you can see three of our books fall into this category. Carmen's *In the Dream House.* Maggie Smith's *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*. And Abigail Thomas's *What Comes Next and How to Like It*. All of these are branching out in form. I also love the visual of a kaleidoscope on the slide. There is this idea that you're piecing ideas and memories together. These are fragmented narratives, but they are not chaotic. They are patterned.

There's going to be, as Linda Joy is going to teach tonight, recurring elements and lots of different ways of approaching the narrative. I think it's quite important to say that the fragmented narratives that we read have a very intentional structure. And in a lot of ways, they're more structured than the associative, because the associative is really following the threads of your imagination and your memories and the fragmented may be doing that as well.

However, there are absolutely these kind of forms that we're going to be teaching in that come and go and get reused throughout the narrative. I'm loving the fragmented trend. I think the reason that writers like it so much is because it gives you an opportunity to do a lot of different things, to experiment with second person, to do little musings and snippets of poetry.

It's very freeing. I'm not going to get too much into that because Linda Joy has much to say about it, but I find the fragmented narrative exciting, both to work on in terms of

writing and reading. We have a different reading experience with it, and it's less confining in a way. I think that a lot of memoirists do get frustrated by the confines of traditional forms, and there's always going to be confines of scene and time.

In a fragmented narrative when you're experimenting with different forms, you have a lot more opportunity to muse and play on the page. I think that's quite exciting and freeing. I agree it's been fun.

Circular: The only example we have that's falling into the circular category among our examples is Ocean Vuong's *On This Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. I do want to note that this book is marketed as a novel and we're aware of that. We think it reads like a memoir, and it's beautiful. Love it. It's a circular narrative because he is circling around this stuff with his mother and the experience of being an immigrant and the shame and his sexuality.

He goes up and over and around, up and over and around as he spins out his story. Jane Allison calls this a spiral. Linda Joy and I have always called it circular. It's clearly the same thing. But I love here quote: The narrative might move around and around with a system of rhythmic repetitions, yet it advances deepening into the past, perhaps, or rising into the future.

Really lovely. If you have something that is like an obsession, and we mean obsession in a good way, by the way, we like obsessions when it comes to memoir, that you're really trying to unpack and figure out and you want to almost like corkscrew into it.

By way of excavating themes, the circular narrative can be such a beautiful structure. It looks like a shell. I love that. I love thinking about it that way. And I hope that you'll all read that book.

We'll make sure to put a link to it in our notes. Linda Joy is about to talk about form. But I am going to say something quickly about it.

Form is different from structure. We're going to first start with what is form and then I want to just take a second to talk about the difference between form and structure for the sake of anchoring that for all of you.

But first, what is form? So as those footprints on the slide showed, it's the way you arrange your words. It's the topography the way the story appears on the page—literally the way it looks. And there can be different choices about how you do handle your form. We're going to go through examples in a moment.

Impressionistic. The fragmented, really fragmented versus longer, slightly fragmented exploratory passages or full scenes. It can be and is in these books, all of those things, and you can choose how to show your reader different parts of your story, which is what's exciting. And you begin to assemble or write these with an eye for what is the reader going to experience, which is a pretty interesting way to look at it.

And then it's the shape and the choices that you make. And many of you may start off writing in a very linear way. And then as you're going, you go, Oh, this could go here. Oh, this could go there. Oh, this could be a different way I could do it. So there's many opportunities to see when and how.

You want to play with form within the contours of your story. And also I had the great privilege of interviewing Maggie Smith on my podcast not very long ago. And for those of you who listened to it, you heard her talking about the arranging of her pieces, and it is like, topography.

There's a long road. And here's a little bump, and how is that terrain, what does that feel like, and the more you get familiar with the terrain of your own memoir, the more you go, oh, A bump needs to be here, a little mountain over here. And there's this way of experiencing your own form and how it manifests as the experiential way that you want to tell your story.

I also think that's one of the things that's making it so resonant with people. It makes me think that you're, you're almost talking about the physicality of experiencing the way that we read something just the way that's an interesting way to look at it. And a lot of writers have been talking about that, Kiese Layman, Lidia Yuknavitch, have been talking about the body experience of how the body shows up on the page, so there is physicality and it could be experiential.

It could be around the “what happened” version or it could be how you are in your body and I can't say enough about that. And then structure versus form: just thinking about this a little bit, structure is the framework and form is the execution.

I think that's a really helpful And I think that's a really helpful way of thinking about it because a lot of places, if you look up what's the difference between structure and form, there's actually not a whole lot of writing about this on memoir. There's a lot of writing about it for poetry.

But again, memoir is a baby genre compared to poetry and fiction. And so what's so exciting about it why it's revolutionary is that those of us who are in it writing now, we're still in the early decades of writing this particular genre. And so this stuff is just very helpful in terms of conceiving how you're moving forward.

The structure is how your book is organized. It's the framework of your story. You’re asking: how are the events going to be told? What are the choices that you're making? Will it be, as we said, fragmented, circular? What is the choice that you are making for your unique story?

The form is the shape, is the topography, is the terrain. There are all kinds of ways that you can do that. That's what Linda Joy is about to introduce us to, drawing from examples of these six books that we've chosen for you guys to take a look at. Yes, very fun to think through all of this. These writers all draw in some way or another, however briefly or however extended.

Linda Joy: A scene takes place in a particular time and place in continuous action. So it's the story we're used to seeing, and this is how the story is unfolding in a scene. And so here in Ocean page 53, we're not going to read everything, but I'll read this. This is an action that is happening with his stepfather.

Paul and I are in his garden harvesting fresh basil for a pesto recipe he promised to teach me. We successfully avoid talking about the past.

There's a clue about the relationship. *Having brushed by it earlier that morning, we talk instead of cage free eggs. He pauses from his picking, pulls his cap over his brow and lectures.*

We have a little bit of a characterization of the relationship between the two of them in this scene, in this moment, then we have a vignette. People ask us. Okay, so what's the difference between a vignette and a scene? Scenic elements can be in a vignette, but not much is happening.

It's a description, a snapshot moment that evokes an image or a feeling. This is from Abigail Thomas. Tim, and her daughter Catherine.

Tim puts his arms around Catherine as if to keep her safe forever. The two of them in each other's arms are like the points on a map, a location in time, a destination. Jennifer took a picture of this embrace, and I love to look at it.

It's basically a moment that she captures, like the photograph that is happening at that moment, and how she feels about it. She muses a little, and that's it. That's one page, on one page, and there is all that white space around it.

Brooke: I do love that about Abigail's book specifically. A lot of them, Maggie Smith especially, is doing that as well. Just look at the amount of white space that they're using, which is something to examine and think to yourself, okay, how am I qualifying these different form choices?

As we read the books, how does it feel to us to be reading a little thing in a bigger white space, and page after page? It's just, it's a very a different feeling. And then poetry. Now, some people are afraid to talk about or think about or look at or deal with poetry because of how it was taught to us. It's a sort of elevated form for some people, mysterious and strange. What? I'm not a poet kind of thing. But actually, we all are in a certain way in that we're interested in words and imagery. And so poetry, of course, uses imaginative imagery, and different kinds of language and metaphors. It has to do with more of language and it evokes an emotion, certain emotions. There's a moment of an experience that we can feel, we can imagine. And again, poetry has all this white space and in that

presentation, we may end up musing and pausing, put the book down, think about it, pick it back up. For Maggie Smith, she's already a published poet

In her memoir, this is just a couple of pages where there are examples page 29 and page 63. I just thought I would give you a little snippet here.

On page 63. “Good Bones” is the title. She has a title in capital letters across every single page of the whole book.

Life is short, though I keep this from my children. Life is short, and I shortened mine in a thousand delicious ill-advised ways.

And she goes on to examine briefly and in phrases, this whole idea of life and the way that she's looking at it in these moments, which is in the context of the situation she's and that she expresses from the beginning with her husband and secrets in the family and the concern about her children. In a very short moment, we get something here from her about what's going on emotionally.

Linda Joy: Impressionistic writing. Now, this is fun. I always love that word for some reason. When I was younger, I played the piano and we'd play French impressionistic music and it had a special feeling to it. And there's impressionistic art and many, most of us know what that looks like.

And impressionistic music. Writing is a feeling, another moment, a single line, and in many of these examples in the books, just a few sentences, there is an experience. Again, it's not even a poem necessarily, or it could be a poem. There's a hint of something. And so we'll turn the page to find out more, so this is from,

Abigail, page 168. This is all that's on the page.

Maine. Chuck has rented a house in Maine for Ralph and his children this summer. They will be together for two weeks.

That's all it says. Now, Chuck is a person who appears in many of the little vignettes and sometimes something is happening with him and her.

Sometimes it's just about Chuck. She's commenting on what Chuck is doing and there's something that's going to happen, what does she mean here? What? We're going to keep reading and find out.

Bluets by Maggie Nelson has a lot of this kind of writing as well. That's not necessarily poetry, it's prose. I think that's also the distinction between impressionism and poetry, that you can do what poetry is doing, but do it with prose. *Bluets.* Yes, I love it for that.

An element that appears in all the books, this idea of a recurring element. This form repeats, and Maggie Smith does all the way through her book. It circles meaning and theme. There's musing, there's fragments, there's single lines. And motifs, so I tried to track some of it.

Here's just a little bit of it, but it's all throughout the book and there's 7 or 8 different themes that she and she puts them across the top of the pages where they appear. *How I picture it*, that theme, that thought recurs throughout the book. Here's an example on page five at the very beginning.

How I picture it, that life, the past, the before life, the before math was a boat. I was on it with my husband. *And later our daughter joined us and still later, our son, the scene was sometimes calm and we could see right down into the water.*

So she's picturing this moment in the past and labels it that way. And all the way through the book. Here's another one, just an example of how she wrote it.

How I picture it, we are all nesting dolls carrying the earlier iterations of ourselves inside. We carry the past inside us. We take ourselves, all of ourselves, wherever we go. Inside 40 something me is the woman I was in my 30s.

This is her experience but she's reflecting about the past and present and who we are. It's very relatable. It's very much about her. But there's a universality to it. What do you think, Brooke?

Brooke: Yes, the recurring elements in Maggie's book were what really moved me about the way that she did it. Probably a perfect example of a fragment or a fractal, the kaleidoscope kind of thing that we're talking about.

There are many instances, and it's very satisfying as a reader because you're thinking, Oh, I know what she's talking about. She's already enrolled me in this. And when you see it again, you're picking up a thread, right? And it's a really beautiful way of capturing the reader's attention and enrolling them in your experience. There's an intimacy. Really lovely.

Thinking and feeling and musings are great ways to deliver that. And that can come in all kinds of forms. Would you like to read this one? And in *Breathe* Imani Perry, is doing it, everybody is speculating, but Perry is doing a lot of speculation.

Reflection sometimes comes on the heels of a scene. Sometimes it actually could be integrated into a scene or vignette. So as much as we're talking about these forms, it's important to say that they all move together in a wave like form. You don't have to think about them to compartmentalize. Think about it more like the terrain and you're like building out the terrain of your memoir.

From Imani Perry:

I wonder at the restraint our ancestors show in order to survive with mouths and energies like ours. Perhaps they studied the discipline of the cool, calm and collected Yoruba, Orisha, Obatala.

The one who is like the Christian father God, but hardly so patriarchal and political. Maybe they made selves inside under the flesh that could hold the anchor, even as the storms knocked them down. Obatala is like the snail and loves them too, because no matter how hot the surroundings, the snail remains cool.

I aspire to be like that, to teach you to be like that, but it is difficult. you This world causes inflammation and it flames.

And notice, there's a lot of speculative writing in here, which necessarily makes it like it falls under the category of reflection.

Linda Joy: Fragments. Again, amazing, interesting ways that the different authors use this but these are from both *In the Dream House* with Carmen Machado and *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson. They offer their impressions and use small snippets that build up through the book, and you keep having this experience that the author is giving you and as a reader you get one a wave almost, and you get one and you get another.

The layers add up so that you get a version of a story that we, the reader end up putting it together, and feeling it and understanding it. *Bluets*, page 14. She says from the beginning, it's about the color blue.

I suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with the color.

That's her very first line. And so that's one of the main themes in *Bluets*.

I have enjoyed telling people that I'm writing a book about blue without actually doing it. Mostly what happens in such cases is that people give you stories or leads or gifts.

And then she goes on to name some of the things that people have said and she develops that theme in this fragment and others along the way.

On page 17, she has this fragment.

There are many, so we just picked a few, but what goes on in you when you talk about color as if it were a cure when you have not yet stated your disease.

That leads toward her going down more deeply throughout the book about this love affair that she had and is also mourning, but it is not a linear story.

In the Dream House by Carmen Machado—an example of these fragments/themes. Dreamhouse as Soap Opera, so at the beginning of every page, or most every section, Dreamhouse as something, Dreamhouse as Soap Opera is here, Dreamhouse as Haunted Mansion here. So it's the theme all the way through and the way the titles are stated, whether it's a scene or a fragment.

She uses different elements. So this was Dream House as Soap Opera. This is all that is on the page.

She doesn't remember, she tells you, before you go to sleep. She remembers being at the bar and then crouching over you naked. Everything in between is darkness.

That's all that's there. She's exploring a relationship in the book, in the various stages of that relationship in this way, using different elements of fragmentation and musing and scenes.

Brooke: Now, a little bit more on form. I had mentioned Lidia Yuknavitch earlier. I've had the luxury of interviewing a lot of these people for my podcast and Lidia taught for us a few years ago. In my podcast, she talks about form coming first and the story following and how she discovered that story could be a sequence of emotional intensities.

I love that idea. A sequence of emotional intensities, which is really what we're talking about when we're talking about some of these non-traditional structures, that instead of following the traditional story arc, we're paying attention to these body sensations, these memories, these spurts of moments, and following that can be quite profound especially for those of you who feel frustrated by gaps in your memory, which we know a lot of our students do. She says that her work is to arrange pieces in a way that reflect her actual body experiences, which is exactly what Linda Joy was saying earlier, this idea that that the structure could mirror how you feel in your body or what your physical experience is in the world.

Tropisms is another beautiful book by Natalie Surratt. I highly recommend this. It's a tiny little book. But what she's arguing is that traditional structures and linear plots work so beautifully for coming-of-age stories, because they, they lend themselves to coming of age stories, but there are these realities, like what Lydia is referring to, life, bodies, movements happen in micro moments and micro intensities.

It’s an interesting freedom to be thinking about all the different forms that Linda Joy just presented and to think to yourself, which ones do I like? Which ones feel right for my book? I am not a poet, so I'm probably not going to be putting poetry into my book. There could be some that don't resonate and some that feel really exciting to you.

And so it's not all or nothing. It's pick and choose, it's choose your own adventure, which is again why we're loving this so much.

Scene as form. Scene is a form or a way of thinking about your work. And this is the scene where Ocean Vuong's mother goes into the grocery store and she doesn't know the word for oxtail. It's this shameful, terrible experience for Ocean.

She's gyrating and making horns and trying to convey what she wants. But what I loved about this is how slowed down it is. You are seeing the sweat drip off of her face. And it says you turn to me, your face wet pleading.

I want to encourage you all to read this: Ocean Vuong does a beautiful job of this zooming in.

And then by contrast, Zooming out. Next, it's a zoomed out scene.

People say history moves in a spiral.

Interesting. Since I'm saying he's writing a circular narrative and here he's speaking to it, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter.

Here I think he is speaking absolutely to the way that he is storytelling. You have this capacity to go hyper focused into a scene, or to pull the lens out. And it's just, it's all still in scene or summary or musings. There are all these different ways that we're looking at this.

You could argue that this first line is amusing, and then he dips into specificity. Lan through her stories was also traveling in a spiral, but he's talking about listening over time as opposed to listening in a singular moment. And so that's also how you get to play with time and spatial awareness in your memoir, which is also partly to do with what we're talking about with regard to form.

Brooke: We're going to go into style, which is also very important.

Thinking about the kind of writer that you are: are you lyrical? Do you write in a more spare fashion? Do you like to develop things into more flowery prose? Think about what your style is. You can even take note today, if you're doing some writing and think about that and how you think onto the page.

Again, the reader will have an experience with how you put your words on the page, and you will too, but maybe you haven't thought about it before. And now you can feel into it and think about it. It's your unique voice. Your aesthetic.

Read out loud. What does your voice sound like? And then, what kind of space are you creating for the reader? And how does it feel? It's hard for us to be objective about these things. And certainly in an early draft, we may be writing a little more clunky, but this is something that develops all of our stories, our memoirs, our writing will develop and develop over time.

These are some of the things you can think about and ask yourself without getting worried about it. I love framing it too as your aesthetic, if you think about decorating a room, or the clothes that you wear, that's why we talk about style, right? It's like, how do you present yourself to the world, or in your, the comfort of your own home?

That's your style. Are you casual? Are you formal? Are you funky? Are you, conservative? All of this stuff and not playing yourself in your writing style as well. And it's fun to maybe try to identify for yourself what you think your style is. Linda Joy has identified the style of the six writers that we are covering in this class.

Linda Joy: It's a subjective analysis, but Wong is, he's urgent, he's raw. He begins the book by addressing his mother and it's addressed to her quite a lot throughout the book, a little bit like the book Heavy, though a different kind of writing. He's remembering, he's investigating the past, he is doing that spiral circle thing, too. And he's exploring his sexuality and a lover that he had, and he uses a third person.

He uses the second person, "you" for himself, too, as does Machado, and then there's Maggie Smith. She's emotional, she's very focused, she's very reflective, and she is playing with themes and structure and time and memory in, in, in her book, in these interesting ways that involve lots of white space and repetition.

And then Maggie Nelson, she's reflective in every vignette. She's using wordplay and it's poetic, it's brief, it's written in a way that is she numbers each thing. And each thing has its own number and its own little section. It's a very interesting way to lay it out.

So we're going through them in some kind of order, but nothing is an actual literal. Time order. Chado is intense. Very detailed. She often writes in second person, the “you” voice referring to herself, and sometimes she uses a third person to refer to herself, which is another technique we can use in distancing a little bit.

Perry is questioning, pressing for insights. She's addressing her sons in her book. You, she's talking to them. Thomas, sound to earth, she's reflective also. Raw detail, and she uses small stories and vignettes throughout. That's the main style as well as a little bit of fragmented. So you can see for yourself how it feels to you in these to explore these different authors.

I would encourage you all to add to this list, to think about what you're thinking about. As Linda Joy said, it's subjective. I agree with a lot of what she says that there's more to add. It's actually a wonderful exercise as a writer to observe other writers and say, what are they doing?

How are they showing up on the page? Because this is style. This is do you want to hang out with them? What would that feel like? And you’re hanging out with them when you're reading their work. There's such an intimacy in memoir, especially because it's their lives and they're inviting you in.

What kind of person are they? How are they portraying themselves? And even if it's a persona, that doesn't matter. It's the consistency of character of the writer on the page.

Our job as writers is to find our own style and to explore that, which we hope you'll be doing as you read these books and look at them and just experiment, give yourself permission to experiment. But there are different voices, of course if you have a goal and intentionality.

In a scene or in a chapter, what does that voice sound like? What kind of language do you use? What kind of cadences show up? And the same with teaching and informing. In different stories, including our own, there's a specific voice for teaching and informing and exposition. And then what about musing?

Do you let yourself muse? What are you thinking about? What, how does, this is where obsession comes in. Maybe there's things that you constantly think about or worry

about or people that keep coming back to your mind. And what are you circling around? Allow yourself to just take that further maybe than you have given yourself permission before.

And what is your writerly aesthetic? Again, like Brooke was talking about, the way that you are in the world, the way you present yourself, the way you like to live, the colors of your world. What is that? See if you can explore that a little bit. And then when you're a protagonist in the story, and a memoir, you're a protagonist.

You're in different moods. We're not going to be the same in every scene, in every situation, and we're going to be with different people whose moods and feelings will have their own voice. So there's anger, there's outrage, confusion, apology. There are also positive ones like being in love and being tender and being gentle, there are different voices that you're already using, no doubt.

But we could become more aware of what those voices are, what they sound like, what it feels like and notice how it feels when you're reading these books maybe even read some and then, free write what, what do you feel, what's happening in your body when you're reading these different books by these authors.

I want to add to we have two books, Ocean Vuong writing to his mother, Imani Perry writing to her sons. We are huge fans of Kiese Layman, who also wrote to his mother, so that's the thing that people are doing. That's a style. Also writing in the second person, as we've said, Machado and Ocean Vuong are doing writing in the third person, which is even more distancing.

There are a lot of different possibilities. And one of the reasons that we chose these very different kinds of books with different writing styles is just to show this very wide range of what folks are doing with voice, with style, with aesthetic and so I know some of you have come tonight not having read the books and that's completely okay.

And as you can dip into them, if you read all six of them, great, but if you didn't, you don't have to read the whole thing, just read some scenes, see what you feel. And I was just thinking about Imani Perry and that little tiny scene that we just read. I love that.

I aspire to be better. I aspire to be that way. Like you can also show your flaws, how you wish you could be, but I'm so angry.

It's these moments of getting to know you by how you characterize yourself. And that's part of finding a style and voice as well, an exploration all the way.

Brooke: It's excavating, discovering, they're all doing that in different ways. But as you said, like Ocean Vuong is a little bit more investigative, there's just different tools that we use to make our way through, Maggie Smith throughout the book is like, How did this happen?

She's trying to make sense of the unraveling of her marriage. And there's just different ways that we employ our questions as well. All very fascinating and wonderful.

Q: In past memoir classes, I've been told not to analyze a character, to let the reader draw their own conclusion. How does this work with musing as you try to figure something out about a person?

A: I think musing is different than analyzing. Musing is how you're circling around your own thoughts and feelings about that person. It's more about you than it's about them, in my idea of it. And maybe analyze is a similar word. But to me, musing is a momentary thing and analyzing.

Sometimes you can just really take it and go with it. I don't know. What do you think, Brooke?

Brooke: Yes. I also think musing could be musing about someone's personality is maybe that word analyzing, analyzing and processing are difficult because I think people can go into therapy territory sometimes and it can feel a little heavy handed. And so it feels like, oh God, don't analyze me. But on the other hand, Characterization is about showing someone's character. And part of that is just also how you're doing the writing. You'll have to play with it.

When you're reading, look at how people are characterized and make sure that you don't shy away from characterization.

Q. I may be the newest memoir writer here. I'm a retired actor who has just been so drawn to memoir, and I've written over the last two years, and revisited all the memories that I was afraid to face. I've written and it's been incredibly healing, but I've written sort of the book before the book.

It's a lot of just stuff that won't be in a book, but really helped me flesh everything out. I've also then gone back and Oh, I see themes. I see connections. But when you say that we need to have the structure before the story, this is where I always feel stuck. I feel like I've fleshed things out.

Brooke: What Lidia Yuknavitch said is that the form like she needs the form before the story, right? And so tonight what we were talking about, all the things Linda Joy talked about, with the poetry, the impressionistic writing, the how is it going to be told?

Lidia is saying that stuff has to come first, like figuring out your voice on the page. We also teach in our longer classes about writing the "what happened" draft, which is what you've done. I'm friends with Piper Kerman, who is my neighbor, and she talked to me about how she wrote *Orange is the New Black* completely linearly from journals, and it was so boring, but she had to get it all on the page. Then she tore it apart, and trashed stuff and moved things around—many memoirists do that, so by no means am I saying, oh, figure out your structure and then write into it.

It's more that here are all these possible structures for you. Now you have some sense of what you have and you're going to shape it into what makes the most sense for you. I hope that's helpful for now. The real answer to how to do anything is to write it. And it gets all the problems get answered and we can't necessarily figure them all out in our head. And so writing is the cure to that disease.

Q: I agree. One quick follow up—I thought that was going to come to me through the writing the book before the book. I thought it's going to teach me what structure is. I didn't feel like it did, but that's for me to figure out. I'll let someone else have it.

Brooke: Thank you for that. I think there is a choice, that a lot of people do get stuck because they don't have a structure. And then it's about trying to. Take what you have and find something that makes sense.

I think one of the things that is so freeing about fragmented is that people are saying I can grab these things and move them around. I can't say enough about Maggie Smith's memoir because she talks about exactly what you're talking about, like how to piece together the mosaic.

Q: So someone is asking about white space.

Linda Joy: *Bluets* has lots of white space, and Maggie Smith. There's just literally a page where there's just a lot of white space. A lot of those.

Reading some other books that have a lot of therapy sessions in them might be helpful. *Love Warrior* is an example that comes to mind by Glennon Doyle and Stephanie Foo's book *What My Bones Know* which both cover a lot of therapy. You can read how other people have handled it.

I think sometimes, when you're trying to figure out how you're going to structure the journey that you want, like a lot of the answer to the question of the structure is how long is your journey, is your journey a year? Is it five years? How do you want to move through time and space? Is it 20 years? It's three and a half years. I think there's not a right answer. I also want to encourage all of you to read a lot of memoir and look at people's structure and then lift it because it's not going to be the same. You're always going to do what you do uniquely in your way. And yeah, so I sorry, we can't answer more because there's just a lot to say about your question. Keep at it and keep reading.

Q: Can you change your style within the book? You're telling a linear story, but then you have individual pages on a specific feeling written differently. In a different voice that's still mine, question mark. Does that work or would it feel too jarring?

Linda Joy: Read some of these books and see there's different moods. Like we were talking about different places, like there's places in Maggie Smith's book where she's musing gently and other places. She's furious. She's enraged and other places where she's trying to understand something.

There are lots of different voices. Same for *Bluets*. There's some exploration going on in the way the voices are. I would say all these books have the same element of different moments and moods and intensity, and it's fine. We need to be authentic to the emotion that we're writing about and what we're doing.

Don't worry about it. Just write it as it is for now. I also want to say about linear—it does not go away just because you're choosing an associative or a fragmented. If you think about Maggie Nelson's book, *Bluets*, she's telling a linear story of her breakup.

It's just that interspersed in all of that is all this stuff about blue and you know what it means and it's very philosophical and it's investigative. it's got so much going on. It's about a piece of a conversation that she just had yesterday. But then this through thread is this story of her breakup, and so it's interesting to think that the stories to some extent do have a linear motion. You're propelling your reader through time and space. I was working with someone recently who was talking about how she's trying to do a circle, but she took it a little too literally. Of course, there's going to be some linear moments and chapters. How does it feel? You'll know, because if the execution feels weird, you're going to realize you have to fix something. If it feels good, trust your intuition.

And keep writing. Writing is the cure.

Class 2: Breaking the Time-Space Continuum

Brooke: Welcome everyone to the Evolution of Memoir, week two, Breaking the Time and Space Continuum.

As we've been saying leading up to this, we're thrilled with all of this content and how it's shaping up to help us explain the trends we've been seeing in memoir. Linda Joy, I have to say, the reason I think this is happening is because memoir is blossoming into its own. As more and more people are writing memoir, they are breaking open the genre in a way that feels exciting and concretizing as we begin to wrap our minds around the things that are happening. Soon, what we see is that experimental won't be seen quite through the same lens. These are the tools we can use, and we're getting those tools together now, naming them for our use. Let's get right to it. We're going to start with narration. Narration means someone is telling a story. They're narrating a story. Let's look at the next slide.

We don't even think about what narration and narrative voice are because we take it for granted. But because we're breaking open how this is done and looking much more closely at the quality, tendencies, and various people's uses of voice and narration, we thought we'd start with a grounded definition and then move on to our explorations in a moment.

Narration is the way that a story is told. Every time you pick up a book, the first paragraph leads you into a story, however it's done. There are many different ways that one can do this, but the idea is to get the reader engaged and interested in a story that's going to unfold. How it unfolds is what we're looking at today, particularly throughout the whole class. The idea is to engage the reader immediately and pique their curiosity. We want them to know more and perhaps even love the voice.

There are so many different ways that we get engaged. As memoir writers, we need to pay attention, extra attention, to how this is done. We can go back and look at books we've already read or studied, look at the first paragraph, the beginning, and then go through the book and see how the voice evolves. You want to create emotion in the reader.

Linda Joy: All craft of storytelling is about getting the reader feeling, and there are many ways to do that. The narrative voice is that storytelling voice. In its strictest definition, it's the writers or narrators use of language, word choice, and the tone of the piece itself. Is it humorous? Is it serious? Is it poetic? Diction, the way the words are actually used, and the logic or illogic that appears in sentences and paragraphs, the narrative voice is the perspective the story is told, and it's designed to set up the readers' expectations, what they're going to get next.

Why does the reader want to keep turning the page? We always hear, "Make the reader turn the page." But what does that even mean? We're looking for something, but what? Why do we turn pages? Why are we turning pages in the books that Brooke and I are presenting now, the experimental works? Maybe they are breaking our expectations of what we're going to find, which makes them interesting. It becomes a journey, a mystery. What is coming next? What am I going to hear next, see next, and feel next? The unexpected gets our attention. Ocean Vuong, wow! He does some things, and we're going to talk about them in the following class. What I noticed here is how he sets out his style. Where's the narrator? It's clear that there is one in the beginning of Ocean Vuong, and he's writing his mother, he's addressing her.

He starts by saying, "Let me begin again," and I turned the page before that, just to make sure I hadn't missed something. So he got my attention immediately. "Begin again," is like we're in the middle of a conversation with her.

"Dear Ma, I'm writing to reach you, even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time at the rest stop in Virginia." He goes back and talks about a memory he has of a stuffed animal."

At that place, I think that book how you stare into its black glass eyes. So he's using reflection, memory.

He goes on, 'I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because, but I wasn't trying to make a sentence. I was trying to break free, because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey.'

Well, I don't know about you, but I didn't quite understand this. I'm like, I looked back, and I thought, where did he use because? He didn't use because. I'm thinking, okay, we're in his thought processes. And, you know, I knew he took a writing program, maybe that's what he's talking about. But now he talks about breaking free and freedom, then he talks about hunters and prey. Well, we know that we're in for an unexpected, interesting story, whatever it is. And we're going to keep reading. What is he talking about? What does he mean? And, you know, what is also interesting is that he doesn't explain it. He just puts it down. And sometimes that's what we have to do, is just put it down and go on, and people get engaged in various ways.

Brooke: Thank you. *Bluets*. I love this little book. Love them all really. So it's totally a non-traditional form and structure. The color blue is a theme. She uses small stories there, you know. We're looking at narration. Some of them are broken vignettes and thoughts, but some are little stories and brief scenes. And there is a chronology to Bluets.

Over time, you find out she's processing thinking about working out the breakup with her boyfriend, and she explores the theme of blue and loss in so many different ways. Blue, the color blue, feeling blue. Joni Mitchell's song, blue, etc. So these associative moments, these flashes, little bits of poetry. She does all of that. This is an example from number 41, which is on page 16. See how short they are along the way. So these were connected.

I thought we'd read how she handled both.

"On the eve of the millennium, driving through the Valley of the Moon on the radio, a DJ was going through the best albums of the century. And somewhere, I think around number 30 with Joni Mitchell's blue the DJ played River and said its greatness lies in the fact that no woman had ever said so clearly and apologetically. I am so hard to handle. I'm selfish and I'm sad now I'm gone. I lost the best baby I ever had."

That's a quote from the song, and we all know the song, most of us, and it goes on from there. The next one is, is exploring that. "So sitting in my office before teaching a class on prosody, trying not to think about you, about my having lost you.." She goes on a while, and then she says, Was I too blue?"

She's looking at the theme of loss here and bringing in Joni Mitchell, which she does several times. She brings in Leonard Cohen. She brings these associative connections in her mind into the text. That's great, right?

So *In the Dream House*, as you can see on the slide Carmen Maria Machado does have storytelling, narration off and on throughout the book. Some are long chapters of more than a page, even two or three pages, and some in smaller vignettes with different voices, often "you" but this is an "I" voice, so I thought it was important to take a look at that.

There's this game I played during gym class when I was eight, when they sent me to the outfield, I would stand so far from everyone else with the balls my classmates hit could never reach me.

Then she talks about what it's like out there, and then she talks about the teacher.

The teacher, Miss Lily, was short and stocky and had a cropped haircut, and one of the kids in my class called her a lesbian. I had no idea what that meant. It was 1994 sitting in the grass during those baseball games. I'd rip up all of the weeds. I broke dandelion stems and marbled...

It goes on and on into the whole dandelion pollen on her face, and the meaning of the dandelion and yellow. She goes off into, you know, these creative associations, even though she's starting with a very grounded set of scenes. I think it's very interesting what she's doing. Agreed, love that book. Love all of these.

Now-point of view. We're going to switch topics here, but all of this is related, of course, because it's all to do with narration. In fact, what is point of view? Point of view answers this question, who is speaking in from what vantage point?

In memoir, of course, you are the narrator. But a lot of what we're talking about in this class and what we're so jazzed about, and the reason that we are teaching the Evolution of Memoir in the first place is because there are, in fact, multiple angles. There are multiple voices and ways to write from you as a narrator, experimentally. And as Linda Joy was saying, maybe pretty soon, this is not going to be called experimental anymore, because it's more common than not.

You have the first person now, and I'm going to talk about this more the first person then. So in fact, we're going to get into all of these different narration styles.

There's second person, and then there's third person. Like Ocean Vuong, we're acknowledging to everyone it is a novel but it reads so much like a memoir that we are teaching it as a memoir style. And he's not the first or only author to write about himself in the third person, and the second person is much more common. We see almost everybody, all of these samples using a second person.

And then we see Imani Perry, and we see who's the other one who's writing to her sons. Ocean is writing to his mother. Kiese Laman, who we're not teaching in this class, is writing to his mother. And so there's a "you' that is a little bit different than the second person, right? It's actually a "you" who is another outside narrator. So there are these different narrative styles that we're looking into.

Now, "outlier narration" would be entering into another character's point of view. This is still an outlier, because it is done absolutely and to great effect with some memoirs, but it's still less common, and I actually hope it stays less common, only because moving in to another point of view completely really does require you to imagine how someone must have felt, and so there are techniques to do that in a way that shows you know this is how this person must have felt. Entering fully into someone's else's point of view would put you into the realm of fiction.

That said, there's a lot of blurring between the lines these days, and I think that's why Ocean's book is called a novel because he goes into the point of view of his mother and his father several times. And I think that's why maybe I'm guessing, well, I and I'm just thinking about Julie Metz's *Eve and Eva* goes into her grandfather's point of view. And so I think it is being done. It's blurring the lines a bit, and I think as long as the reader understands what you're doing, you can still classify it as memoir.

That said, that's not what we're focused on in this class. We're focused on these other multiple ways to enter into your text from you, the narrator, and that's important. And it's just important too to know that you have multiple points of view. I use the nesting dolls image on the slide, which is an image from Maggie's book. She talks about, *I am the 40*

something year old woman, and inside me is the 30 year old version of myself, and inside me is the 20 year old version of myself. And I think that's an actual powerful way to think about point of view, because you have different points of view depending on your age and where you're telling the story from. So more to come on this. I love that.

Yes, we want to acknowledge Sue William Silverman, who is a fabulous memoir teacher, both Linda joy and I know her. We've had her as a guest teacher for us in the past. She has identified these different voices, the idea of an innocent and an experienced narrator, and now she's teaching, I think, in a clearer way, about the aware and the unaware voice, what you knew and didn't know, and how to integrate that into your memoir.

And people are always getting tripped up about this. They have a lot of questions about this. How do I talk about something in my book? If I didn't know, then fill in the blank. So the unaware voice is "what happened." It's you as a character, and we're going to show you some different ways to think about this. This is still Sue's concept. And then I'm going to teach Jeannine Ouellette's concept. I think what's happening is that teachers are all looking for ways to give shape to what we're trying to teach you. And so there's some overlap, but it doesn't matter, because the more tools, the better. You know, as I was saying at the beginning like my head is exploding, because I'm like, oh my gosh, there's such good content, but it's all of a piece and it's all meant to be helpful.

So the unaware voice is the "what happened" voice that is the narrator who is in scene, and it's you at that time. And this is important when you're writing your memoirs, because there are moments in time where you are contained within a scene. You are the age that you were then, and you're not meant to have interrupting voices coming in. It's really showcasing for the reader a particular moment in time and what happened now, the AWARE voice infuses a scene with metaphors and style, conveys emotion, offers a deeper understanding of events now that aware voice is not necessarily the same voice as the "what happened "voice. It's not the same voice as the unaware, but these two voices kind of converge together.

And in memoir, it actually is quite important to bring in that aware voice. Now sometimes our students will say, *I feel like I'm telling when I bring in that aware voice to*

make sense of what's happening on the page. I feel like I'm telling or spoon feeding the reader. And our feeling is we do need some interpretation. It doesn't have to be heavy handed, but the AWARE voice kind of hovers on the edges to say, *Hey, this is what this means. This is what I was feeling. This is the context of this scene.* And so when you're reading work, you can also start to look and see what do I think is aware versus unaware. All of these writers have both that they're interplaying and it's also like it exists there, all within the same scene. Yeah, very exciting.

Now, Jeannine Ouellette, we just had her teach in the fall. She's amazing. I loved this class because she also was very helpful in terms of thinking about this trinity of narrators. So there's you the writer. Now, what I loved about Jeannine is that what she's helping us to explain is something that both Maggie Smith and a lot of them are doing. Maggie Smith is doing it. Abigail Thomas is doing it. Ocean Vuong is doing it, you the writer, are actually a narrative voice. Now, Linda joy and I have historically taught that the now voice should not interject into the narrative, because it often is, in fact, quite jarring if you are not in control of the writer, and they just pop in any which way. It can feel invasive. And you do need to be mindful.

Linda Joy: We'll talk about that in just a second. There's you the narrator, that's the reflective voice, okay, knows more than the character that would be Sue's aware voice, right? And then you the character on the page who knows the least. That would be Sue's unaware. So there is some overlap of concepts here. But I think what's hugely helpful about this is that you the character knows the least, and yet probably gets the most airtime, because scenes get the most air time.

The narrator knows more than the character and gets less air time, but certainly is there kind of interpreting and reflecting and guiding. And then you, the writer who knows all in many of your books, is not going to show up at all, but in some of your books, if you really like this style, you like what Maggie and Abigail and Ocean are doing, then maybe you're going to start to say, You know what, I want this writer voice to be in my book. And in each of those cases, all three of those authors set that up. They teed it up pretty early in the game

to let us know that the writer from now 2024 is a narrator in the book, so you don't want to just drop that narrative voice in midway through your memoir. Yes, good advice. All right, moving along. So common narration pitfalls. This is just to say Be mindful, right? Is it lack of awareness and control over how much knowledge the narrator or character should have in a given moment, not keeping straight or controlling which member of the Trinity is in the driver's seat.

Consider the unintentional use of pulling into the future, that is what we're talking about. That can be very jarring and alienating, but if you do it well, it can be quite beautiful. And then interrupting the narration with events that happened in the future without any consideration for their meaning. I do want to say because this is not, Oh, yay.

Brooke: Memoir is evolving now. It's a free for all? No, not at all. We say you need to have a lot of control if you're going to start experimenting with these different narrative styles and not just bouncing around with no time control, because it will be distracting and alienating and jarring to the reader if you're not very intentionally controlling these narrative voices and narrative angles, and knowing you know the traditional way of using narration and all these other skills is a good foundation so that when you do decide to break off into another version of how you're going to tell the story, you more or less know what you're doing and can make informed decisions.

Okay, so let's look at Maggie Smith's book. She talks to the reader quite a bit, that piece you read a few pages back. This is page 120

Reader, I want you to know that trip to LA was beautiful in plenty of ways.

She's kind of picking up something from a previous sentence on that. So she, that's the now, then her narrator, reflective voice. And when you guys get the slides and take a look, and read around in the passage to see the full effect.

But here she says,

There's so much I wish to undo. I imagine it's cinematic. I'm putting the postcard back into my husband's work bag, and then his hand is taking it out.

She's musing in this reflective space about what she wishes she could do. And then much of the book is insane. She is doing things with her husband, she's doing things with her kids. She's traveling. She's writing.

So page 88 is just one of many examples where she's the character on the page.

My husband and I sat side by side on a couch in the marriage counselor's office. It was a love seat, actually a love seat of all things.

So those are examples of the trinity of narrators in Maggie's book.

Breathe by Imani Perry is largely narrative. It's a letter, it's letters to her son. And there's a lot of musing going on. It's a book that is more narrative than in scene, and you guys can do that if you want to.

So when the world is bent on you not becoming, being and becoming is an uphill battle that can become Sisyphean. You just keep rolling down that hill, not because we cannot love ourselves or find ourselves. We can. It's that every step toward that becoming gets classified.

She's talking about basically the experience of being black in America is what she's writing to her kids about. Quite beautiful, and this is a beautiful book to look at, if you're just looking at someone who is writing like 80% narration.

And then finally, with Abigail Thomas, she starts the book from the writer voice. So for those of you really digging this idea, I will say, be mindful, because it can work. But this is also not something we see a lot of. Both Maggie and Abigail are very seasoned writers.

She starts to say, *I have time to kill while waiting*. She's waiting for her painting to dry.

She says, *Instead of not writing, I am painting. I am not a painter, but I make paintings anyway.*

She's anchoring you right in the moment. And then she transitions into her scene. But what's important about page four is that she says, "This is some years ago."

She gives you this little moment, this is some years ago, and then she drops right into scene.

What can I do for you? I asked Chuck. He was depressed, so was I. He had hepatitis C. He had been diagnosed with stage four cirrhosis. It was not a rosy picture. What can I do

for you? I asked again. I figured if it was good for him, it would be good for both of us. Write another book, he said.

And that sets up her story that we are going to hear her unpack about her best friend falling in love with her daughter. We're going to do more of this time-space idea. It reminds me of "Back to the Future." You know when the time space continuum is broken. So here we are. We're loving this book, too. I've had this book around for a long time, and have read it and underlined it and dog eared it and everything else, and all of a sudden I thought, Oh, there it is, and I dug it off the shelf. The whole book is really worth reading. It's very short. It's a very small, little book, but he talks, she talks about the lyrical seekers, coming of age, style fathers and sons, how different authors are writing about their mothers and daughters, and one that many of you may be particularly interested in, which is called *Trauma and Memory*.

And he says this about that pain and psychological injury, when raised to the level of trauma, create discontinuities in a life that often require different strategies of presentation. So I thought that was because many of us, many of you, are writing about different forms of trauma to take a look at this book and all the different ways that he talks about it. So, you know, basically, you know, what we're looking at in here is how he presents different authors, from Virginia Woolf to Gregory Wolff to pack to Frank Conroy and other writers, showing how they manage time and manage the theme of time. All right, let's look at some things. I just grabbed a bunch of quotes. I liked that there are so many I had to choose. I loved this. This one now, then early in the book too. Now then present past, the sine qua non of memoir with the past deepening and giving authority to the present and the present just by being invoked, creating the necessary depth of feel for the persuasive idea of the past.

You have to wrap your brain around that a little bit. But he's talking about how everything that was in the past and how it affects the way use the present, and then how the present, you know, creates a perspective, you might say, for the past, and then another one. Various memoirs use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narratives of the past.

And here we're talking about a kind of periscope, except going down and getting down deep into the story. In the present, as we see in these books, people are thinking, oh now I get it. And so the trick is how to guide the reader through what we didn't know and what we later know and how to make choices about presenting that as you can see, the moment of the past is positioned in original setting and relativistic continuum, a double vantage point. This manipulation of the double vantage point is a memoir's single most powerful and adaptable technique, allowing for complex temporal access.

In other words, you can skip around in time. That's what he's saying. This is okay to do. And in fact, it's a powerful technique, which I think the double vantage point also speaks to the coexistence of the unaware and the aware.. So it's all of it, but it's like that freedom, I think, for all of you, is so important you know that you can be in the middle of a scene and then have this infusion of what you might not have known by way of interpreting the events, the Now, then, . We're really time traveling then.

The narrator, who is also the narrative subject, can't just be assumed. If the memoir is to be more than reportorial, the writer must create her identity on the page. And so again, we get into what is the narrative voice, and what is the theme, and all of those things in that, and thinking about that. And he goes on to say, the memoirist, "I" must be an inhabited character, a voice that takes possession of its account, meaning. That voice is in scenes, being the character, voice, the "I" in scene, and then we're the "I,' it's also the narrator, too.

If the core mission of memoir is to research into the nature of being or consciousness, the two are profoundly linked. Then it stands to reason that the writer will be drawn to an excavation of origins. And so look at all these writers. That's what they're doing. And so many memoirs are also doing that. *Where did I come from? Where am I going? And how do I make sense of all this stuff,* basically.

So then a little bit about Nabokov and Virginia Woolf. Nabokov and Woolf sought to impart some narrative dynamisms to their sequences of recovered memories, most of them isolated Moments of Awareness rather than stories. I really do suggest anyone wants to get into looking at memories and dynamism and imagery is to read Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past," which is a piece inside of a book called *Moments of Being* by Virginia

Woolf. It is singularly I've had the book for 35 years. It's all dog eared and chewed up. I read it over and over and over again because of where she takes me in her life. That allows me to go there in my life.

Yes, that's a fabulous, fabulous book. And some of you may have been in our class where we taught moments of being about a year ago, I guess. But it's interesting to see, you know, over 100 years ago, Virginia Woolf was doing these little isolated moments, and hers is a very early memoir, you know. And now we're that's kind of what we're talking about, is like people are wanting to go back to these isolated moments, because this chronology style of memoir just got, like, set up as the default and it can and will still be, as I said last week, you know, an important way to write memoir, but memory is nonlinear, and I think that's what people are reacting to in wanting to tell these nonlinear, fragmented stories, because that's how we remember things. It makes how we live, actually, right?

Brooke: This is a deep class, but this is pretty exciting, just by way of understanding what you're doing on the page. So narrative speed and this comes from Jane Allison's book. So I recommended reading it last week. Hopefully some of you got it, and if not still get it, it's really quite helpful. We have meander, spiral, explode. And within meander, spiral, explode, she's writing about this other writer, Seymour Chapman, who and his partner who identified narrative speeds. I think this is quite fascinating.

The difference between story time, which is how long an event took place in the actual world, and text time, which is how long it takes us to tell it on the page.

I know a lot of us are thinking about this without naming what it is, because we're thinking, okay, well, I'm, I'm telling about, a retreat that I went to that lasted for a weekend. Or I'm writing the story of my of giving birth that lasted nine hours. You're writing these things on the page. Of course, they're not a weekend long event or a nine-hour event. You know you're picking bits and pieces of it. And there's also this experience of how is the reader seeing it on the page, and are you summarizing it, and how are you expanding and contracting time? A hugely important question to the memoirist, and also about having control of your narration.

We're going to get into three different ways of thinking about narrative speed. Scene is still going to be the most important. Okay, at the end of the day, scene is the building block of memoir. And even though I said that Imani Perry's is so narrative, it really is a letter to her sons, and so it is in the memoir genre, it's different. I mean, it's a different kind of book. And also a lot of these books are different. I mean, we're talking about different forms, but scene is hugely important to the vast majority of us who are telling a story. So scene as real time, the text time is the same as the story time, because most of your story is going to be okay. This is an event that happened, right? And the character narrator is in situation and you are having a moment. You are doing something in a particular place in time, and you need to bring us there as the reader. This is where Mary Karr talks about the reader is zipped up into your skin. We are there with you, and we are actually re-experiencing it with you. There is dialogue and there is specificity. You all know what scene is, and this is still a big deal, but in terms of narrative speed, in real time.

Now let's move into talking about summary: it's fast, a little text and much story time, hugely helpful for things that you don't want to give every single detail. Maybe I want to tell you about my submit my first semester of college. Well, God knows, I'm not going to walk you through day one, this happened. Day two, this happened. Day three, this happened. What are the highlights of my freshman year of college? And maybe it's to characterize something about who I was at the time, and what I need you to know that is pertinent to my story.

The story takes much longer in real life than the reader spends reading the text. Some of your story is necessarily going to proceed through summary. And a lot of times you'll see summary at the beginning of a chapter, it kind of catches us up in a way, or lets us know what's happened between point A and point B. And sometimes you want to talk about how things used to be or how they were, typically, and that is a great place for summary, but you don't want to tell your whole book in summary, because, God, it's can be really, really boring. Summary is okay to kind of zoom, speed us through the record a little bit. But if your whole book is in summary, then guess where you are, the land of telling. Scene is very

important. You can do a little bit of these experiments, then you want to drop back into scene.

Gap**.** This is what I was most excited about, because I know all about scene and summary, but I was thinking, Ooh, gap, what's this? This is the fastest speed.

I'm often talking to writers about just jumping forward, two years, right? Let's say that I want to talk about the space of time that I was in, Let's say there's a moment that I was in post-divorce, for instance. And then you are saying the next two years were mired by depression, for instance, you know, I woke up out of the fog, blah, blah, blah, something like that is a gap. Or you just use white space, or you just have an end of a chapter, and you pick back up. You know, five years later…you're allowed to do that kind of stuff with time.

It spares the reader too much summary. Anything can happen within the white space. This is Jane's quote, a few minutes a month, centuries, not a lot. But, you know, we're not living that long. But still in fiction, we know that's true. It's very, very helpful to know that you're not obligated to walk the reader through literally everything that happened in your life. And this is true time travel, so it's great. A lot of our writers are doing this. No story time here. The story itself has frozen. We have a lot of examples of this.

The example that I read last week from Ocean Vuong, when he's having that moment of shame when they go to the grocery store with the oxtail, you know, there's the moment, it's he's in scene, but then when he tells you about how it feels and the sweat dripping down his mother's face. these observations that's kind of causing a moment in time, but the reflective narrator takes over, and here's where we have a lot of the things that we're trying to ask you guys to do, takeaways, reflections, writing outside of scene.

It suspends time, because we're asking you to make meaning. And so there's a lot of opportunity for pause and much what Linda Joy and I teach around reflection and takeaway falls into these pause moments. The gaps can be transitions, but there are other moments of transition, new chapters, new sections, line breaks.

In a book, you might see a dingbat separating sections, or what we call a double double space, many of them have, especially Ocean Vuong's. Transitions can jettison you into a totally new time and space, or they might tether you to the previous chapter. We have

examples of both of those. So when you're reading, especially when you're reading these books, pay attention to space, white space breaks and also where the writer transitions you because that will really help you think, how are they controlling time? And then, how can you control time? This is all ultimately about time control and the method by which you want to tell your story.

We're going to end with some examples. He's on page 60.

1964 when commencing his mass bombing campaign in North Vietnam, General Curtis LeMay, then chief staff of the US Air Force, said he planned on bombing the Vietnamese back into the stone ages.

And then he's the next line.

1997 Tiger Woods wins the master tournament. 1998 Vietnam opens its first professional golf course.

He's making all these connections, but he is summarizing things, and it's quite interesting, and he does a fair amount of summarizing.

Now, a pause. This is where time is frozen, okay? Paul finishes his portion of the story. Now you see the reflective voice coming in, and I want to tell him. I want to say that his daughter, who is not his daughter, was a half white child which meant the children called her ghost girl, called Lana traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy. He's stopping time because he is giving context, and Paul finishes his story, and then Ocean moves into explanation, context, interpretation, and we are no longer in a linear moment. We have stopped and we're receiving what he wants to tell us in that moment, very powerfully.

Scene: you guys all know what it is, but scene can be articulated by now. We're putting our reader in a place in time. There's often dialog, and he comes back out of his little pause and drops right into scene because Paul says to him, *maybe you shouldn't call me grandpa anymore. Paul's cheeks pinch as he sucks the second joint, killing it. He looks like a fish*.

And then it goes on and he's in a moment we're in Ocean Vuong's skin in that time, because he's telling us what his grandpa is saying

Maybe you don't call me grandpa anymore.

And then a gap on the following page, because at the end of the scene with Paul, there's a white space, and then all of a sudden we're back to a letter.

There's so much I want. Tell you, Ma, I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify. But some things are so gauze, behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged and shed, that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it.

I hope you all read the whole thing, because it just really does help you to show how you can move through all of these different speeds. It's actually pretty exciting. It's a wonderful book. These last two are just transition examples.

I want to show you guys that there are different ways to transition. One is tethered.

Okay, so in Maggie's book, at the end of page 151 is the end of a chapter.

It came down to this, what business did I have criticizing his parenting when I was off in LA I'm working. I said his response, sure you are next chapter, okay? Transition, reader, I want you to know that trip to LA was beautiful in plenty of ways. It was more than sure you are.

And she moves on, but she's connecting these two things, and that is a tether, okay? And that is different from a leap forward, which is what Abigail is doing and I'm showing these pages, but look how she moves from winter all the way to fall in the span of four pages.

A winter afternoon spent in bed, the arthritis in my hip hurting and me too lazy to find the Advil 98

And then she's just talking about where she is in the world. That is narration.

When she wakes in the morning and goes downstairs to make coffee, her daughter says, *Mom, you look crazy*. And it's only partly because of her hair, which sticks up in bunches like feathers, and then two pages later, *late fall, and all color is gone*.

She's moving us through time and space very quickly, but she's anchoring us, and the transitions are sometimes about season, sometimes just about something she wants us to telescope in and look at. Again, the time management is what we want to impress

upon all of you, and that you have a lot of different narrative voices. As you move around and explore them, pay attention to time. Yes, time and time again.

Q: My question is about what to do with the AWARE voice. If most of the memoir is in the present tense, but the writer is telling a story about a past experience. So does that mean that the AWARE voice is thinking actually of like Danny Shapiro's inheritance, where she's aware in the present, but she's telling a story from the past.

Brooke: What matters is to be grounded in what the point is, and what you're showing and what you're telling, and being clear about how you move the reader from one consciousness to another. I would say it's sort of abstract to be able to answer it. I think also try these new techniques you can try them in different ways. You may decide to change how you use tense. I

Maybe you want to use reflection, or are you using action, or are using a pause? How are you using the voices and what's happening in the time frame, and what's your intentionality? That's a lot to think about.

Q: Is the AWARE voice in the past tense?
Brooke: It doesn't actually matter. I want to be really clear about that, that nothing that we're teaching tonight is saying, this has to be in the past, or that has to be in the present. It's completely interchangeable, because no matter where you are, that present versus past tense choice, it's just going to inform the style of the story. So you can pop yourself into 10 year old Jane, 38 year old Jane and still be operating with the different skills that we're talking about. But this question of the aware versus unaware is quite important for people who are usually in younger places, because there are things that you might not have understood that you have context for later.

For those of you writing coming-of-age, you might take a look at that, but like in the six month class, just because I have this example close at hand, we talk about JR Moehringer and how he's having this moment with his mother, and they're having an

exchange. He's doing something, he's using this machine, and she says, you're not using that, right? And his reflection is*, I could sometimes see that my mom that I could be as much of a mystery to my mother as she was to me.* Now, does an eight-year-old have that awareness? No. So this is what we're talking about with regard to infusing. It's like it's coming in and saying, hey, my aware narrator is visiting. He gives a sentence for the reader for context about my relationship with my mom, and that's what we're talking about.

Then, we're back in the scene, but that narrator can keep coming in and visiting, doing a little interpretation, and then leaving. I think also the question is, how much to do that? Because sometimes, well, we can't give a rule, but to really ask, do you really need to go into the future right now, or can you keep on in the story for a while? I think that people get nervous about but now they know so much and they really want to put it in. And I've done some coaching with people, and they're like, but. And there's no one rule, but is it necessary to leave the now time frame? Are we losing anything in the story at that moment by going away. I do want to make clear that JR doesn't leave in that moment. But going into the future is a question for sure. Maggie certainly has made some intentional choices, because what she's doing is she's unpacking. She's taking all these tissues out of this box and trying to figure out what happened in my marriage? And she's examining that from now, not from a younger vantage point

.

Q: I'm dealing with recovered memories as that's what my book is about. I got caught up and recovered memories, so that's difficult to write about. What advice do you have?

Linda Joy: When that's happening, there is a weird time space thing going on in your mind. I think that sometimes we have to back up and say, okay, when we're looking at what we're writing for the memoir, what does the reader need to know right now, and where does it go? That's the question we're talking about throughout this whole class. And you need to take care of yourself around putting all that stuff down. This is trauma writing. One of the things that Birkerts talks about is ways to write the trauma memory. So you might want to get the book and look at what he says about it, because he gives some examples of books that are

about trauma writing and see if that's helpful to you. It’s about self-protection and how memory can trigger trauma. So, be mindful, be careful.

Q: I'm writing in the present tense. It's mostly seen with some reflection. Can we talk about compressing time? And that probably is right about the time I started to talk about summary, but when writing in the present tense, so summary, absolutely can happen in the present tense, you know.

Brooke: It is like you transport yourself. Let's go to my college example, just because it's at hand, right? I am a freshman in college, putting me at 18 years old. When I am now 18, I can write about being 18 in the past or the present, and I'm still embodied in that year. It’s 1990 and it doesn't matter if it's past or present. I am there. I'm in the scene. And the summary is the same, regardless of whether it's present or past tense. I can say I spend this whole semester studying as hard as I can. I need to prove to myself, I'm here for a reason. That's summary. Just talking about being there, I could write that whole thing also in the past tense --I spent the whole semester studying. I had to prove to myself, blah, blah, blah, right?

Don’t get too wrapped up on tense, because you can quite literally do it the same way. But it's really helpful to write one scene in the past tense and then write the same scene in the present, because then you also just start to make tangible what it feels like in your body. It might help you also make some decisions. You can also open up doors when you try the different tenses, and maybe you end up going in one of those directions other than what you thought.

One comment is that the concepts of time feel a lot like French verb conjugations. They have that perfect complexity and an interest in truth, right? But my question is about when one is at the stage of mapping structure. Would we notate like by a certain scene?

Oh, use a pause here, or use a gap, or use a voice. There are a lot of these tools to use after you have your first draft and you're now, you know, reworking things when is what we've been taught today, considered and integrated. I'm sure we have different thoughts, or

maybe they're overlapping, but what I would say is that you will drive yourself absolutely crazy if you try map out scene, gap, summary in advance, because that's just not how you write. But what we're trying to do is give you language for what it means to jump in time. You can do a hard stop and you can jump,. Or if you are summarizing, summarizing, summarizing. Look at your chapter, which I have done many times, and I think, this entire thing is summary. I have to go back and pick it apart and turn some of that into scene.

Anyone could get tripped up around hyper structuralizing all of this stuff, and it's more just about awareness and how to talk about what you're doing and maybe analyze your own work. Oh, I'm heavy handed in this. I'm doing this. And many people need to write that "what happened" draft first. Then can go in and think, okay, I think this about it. I have a new perspective on that. You create a beautiful version, the artistic version after that.

Sue William Silverman talks about this a lot. She says all of her early drafts, not just the first one, but the 10th one, sometimes the 20th are awful. She says she needs to try to get rid of them so nobody ever sees them. But then, but she has something to hold on to, to go into and move and create that artistic work. I doubt that I wrote everything this way in first draft. I really do. I think whenever we're talking about this stuff, we want to make sure you guys know it's meant to be supplemental and supportive, not meant to be like hovering over you and your writing process. You know you need to have some creativity and some expansiveness, to see what unfolds.

Q: Doesn't that break the fictive dream. Yes, we're trying to show in this class that memoirists now are breaking so many of the concepts we've been teaching for 10 years. And the answer is, things evolve. These books are totally opening our minds to genre that is ever evolving.

Linda Joy: I think we just have to have permission to keep writing the story down as best we can, because there is no one right way to do it, and the fictive dream idea is something we teach, and it means you keep the reader in the dream of a story. We've taught people not to interrupt it. But frankly, in these books, I experienced the dream. The style didn't break it up

for me at all. In fact, it created a dream, because we're moving around in time in a different way, the way our minds work. How their minds are working is how mine works, I'm kind of a time- trippy person in the first place, so for me, it enhanced the dream of the story.

Brooke: When I interviewed Maggie for the podcast she said some people love what she's done and some people hate it. So it's also okay to be a critical reader—such as, I didn't like when Maggie says, dear reader, or talks to the reader. I've read a lot of my students' work where people do that, and I say let's not do that, because it's a little presumptuous. It's a device, and you have to decide it's like hot chili pepper instead of regular pepper,

Linda Joy: But Maggie gets away with it, I think, because of her structure and because of how, like I said, she's just unpacking these layers. And you want to if it feels authentic to you, and it's your voice. I think that that often shows and is felt by the reader, but if it's something that you're forcing or that you know is clunky, so much of this also comes in the execution. But these are such great questions and revision, revision, right?

Someone in the audience said: she wrote about a relationship and labeled it as toxic and trauma bonded prior to writing the dialog. Is it better not to do that?

Brooke: Absolutely, do that. Whatever you need to do to name something, if you want to, put a label on something that says this is hot and it bothers me, so you know every time you touch it that it's a little hot to the touch. Whatever you guys want to do to protect yourselves, we're supportive of. There are many stages, and we need to take care of our hearts and our minds and our bodies while going down these tunnels and labyrinths and come back up for air.

Class 3: New and Evolving Techniques

Brooke: Welcome, everybody to New and Evolving Techniques. This one was fun and challenging, Linda Joy, to find all these examples.

Linda Joy: Yes, fun and challenging. We want to share with you our excitement about all these things that we're noticing, and there are a lot of them in a lot of different places. We select from those and give you a taste of them all the way through some neat books and a few others.

Brooke: Some of these things we talked about when we talked about form. I will say the idea behind technique would be implementing some of the form.

The idea of technique being a palette that you would use, right? I think it's a really lovely metaphor. Linda Joy and I have used it often, that writing a memoir or any book, for that matter, is like layering on colors, painting a canvas. I think what we're teaching here is really outside-the-box techniques. We're moving beyond the classics into impressionism and other kinds of works, and there's a new era being spawned, and so that's what we're examining in this whole class.

We're starting with intentional repetition. We're bringing in a lot of examples this time around. We didn't want to stick uniquely to the six books that we recommended for reading for this class, in part just because there are so many fun examples that we couldn't help ourselves by reaching outside of the six. *Heavy* — Kiese Laymon in general is really brilliant in using intentional repetition. My feeling about intentional repetition is it's trancelike. It brings you into a lyricism and a way of thinking about something, and it also stops you because of the way that it uses the same words. So you say to yourself, "Okay, pay attention." It has that kind of feeling to it, and there's a cadence. So this is where his grandmother asks him to go and write down how he's feeling, so he takes this journal and he says:

I wrote the words "be kissing me in the morning"
"be choking me" "be running a train" "be beating
my back" "be hearing her heartbeat" "be slow dancing
with me."

And there's much more. These ellipses probably account for maybe six more of these sentences:

"be hitting hard" "be saying white folk hit the hardest"
"be laughing so it won't hurt" "be eating when I'm full"
"be kissing me" "be choking me" "be confusing me."

He's speaking about his mother here, what she does to him basically. Then he writes:

"At the end, I wrote, "Grandmama, can you please help
me with my words?"

A beautiful invitation into some hard feelings, and also interestingly, there's a way in which this is also him journal writing, so there are layers of things going on here, but I highly recommend reading this book. He also has a certain degree of poeticism, not as much of a poet as Maggie Smith, but certainly a poet in his own right in terms of how he approaches the writing.

Linda Joy: Yes, his cadences, choice of words. Of course, Maggie Smith does this a lot all throughout her book. She does it in so many different ways, which we did touch on in the Form class, but the thing that I find really delightful, this is just one example of the titles that she runs across: a note about plot, a joke. She has these different titles, and then under them something really short and fragmented. It's a thought or even a quote. "How I

pictured it" is another one. So, this is all the way through. "A FRIEND SAYS EVERY BOOK BEGINS WITH AN UNANSWERABLE QUESTION." Two examples:

> Then what is mine?
> *how to forgive*
>
> Then what is mine?
> *how to let go*

Two of these kinds of examples, including the repeated "Then what is mine?" and the italicized answer or response, you might say. It really creates a reading experience. Both of us have been really thrilled by reading Maggie Smith and inspired by it. I liked the sense of gloom and freedom in the book and a sense of repetition as, again, another cadence throughout the book. She also carries what Brooke and I call "through threads" of ideas and scenes woven throughout, but not in a way you might not remember that it was there before. Then when it comes again, it's kind of new. Then after a while you go, "Oh, yeah," and it starts to come into your consciousness gradually what she's been doing. Then you might even go back and read some of the other ones because the meaning of all these different fragments build up over the course of the book. So, I was just entranced.

Brooke, would you like to add anything to that?

Brooke: I agree. You use "entranced," and I use "trance." One of the things that's so cool about repetition is the reader is already enrolled, and there's a real satisfaction when we recognize the reading saying, "Oh, yeah, I've seen that before." That's very satisfying. It's surprisingly so. You feel like you've been taken into the writer's intimacies, so that's another reason for it, right.

Linda Joy: And then Ocean Vuong. He does many different things. We've touched on some of them, but we wanted to show you one that we didn't talk about before. Here, and then

twenty pages later he does again. These are essentially a list, but the way it's laid out on the page is every other line, so there's a big space between each of these, but it's essentially almost like a poem of snapshots and moments that Ocean Vuong has about Trevor. This is partway through the book when he got to understand what was going on between he and Trevor. So this is just a few of these. It goes on for several pages:

> *Trevor rusted pickup and no license.*
> *Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood.*
> *Trevor too fast and not enough.*
> *Trevor waving his John Deer cap from the driveway*
> *as you ride by on your squeaky Schwinn.*
> *Trevor who fingered a freshman girl then tossed her*
> *underwear in the lake for fun.*
> *For summer. For your hands were wet and Trevor's*
> *name like an engine starting up in the night. Who*
> *snuck out to meet a boy like you. Yellow and barely*
> *there.*

Linda Joy: We can see when it's all together here on the screen. It's made of imagery. It's made of chosen images to create a portrait of his experience with Trevor. He uses the "you" to refer to himself as we talked about before, and there's obviously a sense of emotion and even in here revealing what he reveals about Trevor also as he goes on beyond here. I just want to mention that twenty pages later, on page 173, he does a similar separated by two spaces, but a set of images and happenings and associations and memories about his mother, which I found interesting to see it here and there that similar format came up, and I didn't track to see if there was another one, but because these are the two most important emotionally connected people, I think in the book to him, it had something to do with that. Did you have any ideas about that?

Brooke: On the formatting part, I think that's an interesting thing to look at. It was one of the things I've been paying the most attention to with these books that we assigned. [09:46] maybe has the most standard of the formats, actually, that's why as much as I love audiobooks, when I get these kinds of experimental ones, I like to look at how they fall on the page. This one in particular, you all should take a look at page 153 in your books, because of course this formatting is not doing it justice. It has a very different look and feel on the page.

Linda Joy: You can see it.

Brooke: There's spacing, yes. Spacing matters, and white space matters. That's certainly one of the things that we're also playing with, although that has less to do with the authors themselves, although you can, of course, have some input on formatting, but lots of times that's your designer doing something cool for you.

Linda Joy: I wonder if he did ask for it. We didn't get into all that.

Brooke: I'm sure he asked for a certain kind of spacing, particularly with regard to the poems. But a lot of times once they get on the page, the designers choose things like tabs and other things. Of course, you have say as an author as well.

So we see lists to create moments of meaning as we've been talking about. There is this interesting thing where, at three different points in her book, she just lists things, and I really like this, too, because of the way that it breaks up the momentum of the chapters, and each one of these lists signifies something. In this case it's things that my mother left me. I won't read everything. You guys can see the list. But three wooden jewelry boxes, a picture of every house she lived in. It's about nostalgia and sentimentality because her mother died. So it's a moment, too, to think about how you use lists and for what.

The other day someone was saying to me that they had three—maybe more than that actually—different…Oh, I know what it was. She had lived with her mother, and chased

her mother as an adult for complicated reasons, which is really at the heart of the book, and she moved around with her eight different times, but she didn't want to show that. I said, "How would it be if we made a list, show the first scene and then say here are the other addresses that we lived in, something like that?" So there's also this way that lists could propel you through something if you want to show that something happened too many times, for instance, but you don't want to write that scene over and over again. So I thought that was an interesting idea.

Linda Joy: Gina Frangello, *Blow Your House Down*. I love this book, and I've recommended it a lot. Its release was a big wild thing. Her book came out three years ago or four or five. I've lost track. It was before Covid. We met with Gina, and we talked about her book with her as we both had read it, and we taught the book. She blew open a lot of typical formatting and presentation that people were used to, so the book made a big splash out in the memoir world. She began it with the letter "A", and she does pages and pages of what "A" stands for. For her it began to create thematic elements in her book, which is about the affair she had, also her family, falling in love, feminism, family feminism, and treason covers part of it. So this is the beginning, and she uses it later as well.

Page 7 - **A is for Alice**:

A's mother, Alice, was once told by A's father that she should "take a lover" because A's father was no longer interested in sex (at least with his wife) and could not satisfy her. Although she had two opportunities that A knows of, **Altruistic** Alice nonetheless remained faithful to her **Asexual** husband even past his death.

A is for Antiheroine:

Um. This is not that kind of book.

A is for Antecedent

In 1997, the year A first encountered her future lover by accepting one of his stories over-the-transom for the magazine she was newly editing. **Adultery** laws were used to charge a Harvey, Illinois, woman for the same crime A would—fifteen years later—commit.

She's being very creative here. She's talking about herself but not directly. She's playing with words: Alice, Altruistic, Asexual, Antiheroine, Antecedent. It goes on. Associations that she's making with all of the things, so the word play and the way that she creates associations that have to do with highlighting what's going to be telling in the book. It sort of like she takes a flashlight and she roams it around all these places, but she's creating a list reportedly, and you just have to keep reading and find out what is she going to do next. It's just so creative.

Brooke: It's interesting because I think this actually answers a question in the chat. "What are the advantages of these snippets in building a theme in such a poetic way as opposed to more traditional memoir?"

I will say that Gina's book is a pretty traditional memoir, but then she'll interject and do something like this. A lot of these books have very traditional elements, and then they'll come in and do something a little bit unusual. So this list, as Linda Joy said, was building in some of the themes: betrayal about sex, about what women are allowed to do, how women are allowed to be. It sets the tone, like Linda Joy said, in a very creative way. It can be heavy handed. There's a way in which this book is about justifying her affair, and that can feel like a hard thing to write about. Sometimes you want to write around it and not to the heart of the matter, and so I think she did that pretty well.

Linda Joy: It's a way of coming in at an angle, not directly into the theme. It's stuff that we can all think about when creating ours.

Brooke: Absolutely. That's a fun way to think about.

So devices to enter into other points of view as we talked about, too, Ocean Vuong in particular, but of course his called a novel, so perhaps that was why. Maybe he needed and wanted to enter into other points of view in ways that felt a little tenuous for a memoir. In both of these examples, Linda Joy is going to read her own book. This is *Eva and Eve*, and I love how Julie Metz does this. She enters into this other point of view. Julius is her grandfather, so it's him, but it's also omniscient in a way, so let's read it. It says:

In a photograph from 1928 that does not exist…

So this is imaginative. This is speculative.

…Julius is watching freshly printed letterheads roll off the press. At the top is the courtyard and factory behind it. Tiny bustling employees carry boxes of finished work for delivery. This scene is set against the factory smokestacks that do not exist, (industrial progress!) and a suggestion of the Vienna skyline, the urban metropolis. Even after the Hapsburg Empire was dismembered, Eisenmann insisted on keeping the imperial seals as part of the letterhead, and Julius kept the design after Adolf's death in 1924. The engraving is so detailed that a sharp eye can make out the bay window of apartment number 5, where Julius lives with pregnant Anne and his two sons.

We'll find the page number, Lisa. I think this is quite brilliant, especially if you're wanting to pull from history, this is stuff that's happening clearly before Julie was born.

She's writing about her grandparents. Many people are trying to figure out how to do that kind of writing well and still have it be a memoir, and this is certainly one technique.

Linda Joy: Julie uses this technique throughout the book. There are letters that don't exist, quotes that don't exist, imaginative moments from different people's points of view. The thing she does well that we want more people to be able to do, she's exploring the nature of her history, much of which was not directly told to her. She only knows some of the outlines. Her mother wouldn't talk about these things, so Julie did all this research. She traveled to Vienna; she went to these places; she looked up everything she could, but she wanted to tell the story of what it was like to actually live in Vienna as it was invaded, but what was going on before then that there was a good life going on and normalcy. So she creates this whole world using research, speculation, actual photographs, and photographs that don't exist.

In my book, *Song of the Plains*, I'm also using research to understand my grandmother who raised with me. We had lots of difficulties that also had elements that allowed me to see the person that I actually am today in this book, so I wanted to show how I came to understand her as a young person and a young woman. What was she trying to do? What was she trying to get away from? Because I knew her so well, I could keep together a scene that I imagine is true, is very likely true, but I am imagining it. She met her first husband, Blaine. They were sixteen years old.

> *I don't know how she met Blaine, but I imagine it was this. He was a well-known jazz musician in the area, and his band played in a hotel in town, a fine hotel that looked upon the Great River. Lulu was sixteen or seventeen then, going to high school and learning about history and languages and numbers. She sat in classrooms with the girls who lived in the fine houses on the bluff. She watched them learning, how they spoke, imitating*

> *their gestures. She convinced her grandmother Josephine to copy some dress patterns and sew her up some dresses that looked like theirs. Blanche* (her mother) *would come to town and ask her to come back to the farm and help with the children, but Lulu resisted as often as she could. It became even clearer to her that the farm life was not for her.*

I wanted to reveal how I believed she was so different than all of her other half-brothers and sisters, and I knew how much she loved history and language and how much she loved learning. I'm figuring that in order to be able to change her life and go from a lower class, working woman being with Blaine in a middle-class life. She was trying to create something on purpose.

Brooke: Now we're talking about talking to the reader/writer as narrator as we taught in Class 1, I believe. This is less common, but still we wanted to show how it's done. Mary Karr does this periodically in *The Liars Club*. She does a lot of parenthetical asides where she talks to the reader, so she doesn't say, "Dear Reader," but she reaches this point in the story on page 9 where she's giving you a bit of context, and then she stops you. She says:

> *Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for a while. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here. I don't mean to be coy. When the truth would be unbearable, the mind often just blanks it out.*

That sets you up to say, "Oh, okay. She's going to weave this story out for a while," which she does, and she doesn't come back to it until the mid to late pages. It's the same

thing, because she's acknowledging I'm stopping the story now, and then we'll come back to it later, so that's one of a couple of different ways to do it.

Linda Joy: Next, we are with Maggie Smith again. In the olden days, writers used to talk to their readers, and then it was less of a technique that was used less often and so on. Those were in novels, so this is all about memoir becoming very flexible with voice and technique, which is what we're very excited about. This is her prologue and, again, everything she writes is pretty poetic, but she's inviting the reader immediately.

> *Before we go any further together, me with my lantern, you following close behind, light flickering on both of our faces, I want to be clear about something. This isn't a tell-all. A tell-all would need an omniscient narrator, God-like, hovering over the whole scene and seeing into the houses.*

This isn't a tell-all. We don't get all; some, yes; most if we're lucky. The whole book is about this is what I found, and then this is what else I found, and this is what I didn't know, this is what I found later. She writes it in a way that we get the shock that she feels as she makes this discovery, which really does bring us along.

Brooke: Another question: "Is it okay to do this kind of narrating late in the book, or maybe just once or twice, or does it need to be a theme throughout?"

It's more about a continuity, and I would say if you all of a sudden start talking to your reader like on page 200, that would be quite jarring. So you need to have it show up periodically so as not to be completely surprising so that's why I like that. In both these cases, this is the prologue in Mary Karr's on page 9, so it's happening pretty early on. Again,

you want to set things up for your reader so that there's a certain flow to the work and also continuity, and not start doing something. I also say to my writers you can't just throw a second person's theme in your memoir, again, like on page 250. It will be like wait, why are we doing this now. In that way it is truly like a musical score. You want to make sure that you're interspersing the percussion. There's a little bit of these sections that give it some flow.

Linda Joy: Somebody said to me years ago as I was learning how to write "you teach the reader how to read your book by how you set it up at the beginning and very, very early on." You basically are saying I'm going to make you part of this discovery, and the use of "you," using it early, then you can use it and then not use it and then come back to it, and it won't be a surprise.

Brooke: Now I'm moving on to some shorter kinds of things. The notion that yes, of course, you can excerpt other people's words, and we only have one example because this is pretty straightforward, but in *Hourglass*, Dani Shapiro writes:

> *The voices of Carly Simon and James Taylor*
> *fill the car. It's 1978, and they're singing*
> *'Devoted to You': Darling, you can count on*
> *me 'til the sun dries up the sea. Until then*
> *I'll always be devoted to you.*

So it could be excerpts of other people's writing, song lyrics, which in these cases you have to get permission if they are people who are as famous as Carly Simon and James Taylor, any song or poem, but that is a fun way to intersperse new ideas and context and texture into your work, so it's certainly available when we're talking about techniques; not that this is now, but still we're showing all kinds of things, so this is here for the taking. Many, many memoirs do this. Memoirists use all kinds of quotes and excerpts from others,

and the rule about that is that if you're using prose, you can use up to fifty words without permission, but if you are using more than fifty words or someone's poetry or lyrics, then you always need to get permission. It's permission from the publisher, not permission from the assistant to the person, so that's the important thing as well. Whoever owns the rights is the person who needs to be solicitated.

Linda Joy: You've all seen how Abigail promised, I think. The whole book is fragments of moments and scenes. I find that reading it all the way through is like little windows have been opened along the way where I'm seeing something particular from Abigail about something, and it's about dogs, of her daughter, of her friend Chuck, or growing older or dying, drinking, all kinds of different thematic elements, snippets. It does go in a chronological direction, loosely chronological, especially the story about Chuck and about her daughter, and about her own drinking, as a matter of fact. But it's very easy to read because you sit there and ponder a paragraph or a moment, and she essentially brings you into her living room, and some of these things are very, very short, such as on page 291, late in the book, the end:

> *I wish when the time comes we can all join*
> *hands and rush into the surf together.*

A good way to die, right? And then this is a friend of hers, just a small snippet.

> "*Good morning," she says, in her generous, cheerful*
> *voice. This is my favorite way to start off the day.*
> *We talk on the phone as often as if we were in the*
> *next room, little bits of our lives transferred back*
> *and forth.*

It's such an ordinary thing. I was thinking why did she put that in? Because she's letting us know about her ordinary life and that we have an ordinary life that we [0:31:07], and we have a certain way to start off our day. We might even start thinking about that when we read her. I feel that is a way to reach us through her ordinary life in that moment.

Brooke: In some ways Abby's stuff is so simple, but she creates this mosaic and so each of those pieces together paints this bigger picture of her life, and it's really lovely how she does that with so few words.

So, excerpting from journals. People often ask about it and how to do it. I am not a fan of long journal pieces. It's sort of self-indulgent, in my opinion, like that was her journal, and if it gives context to the current day, great, but maybe just use parts and pieces of it. This is one is interesting because this was the book that I worked on at Seal Press and I loved it for its creativity, so I have two examples tonight. But here she has selected journal entries, and the whole point is about an eating disorder. She's tracking her purging and her weight, and it's list-y again. Here we are back to lists, but also it's just a snapshot. She's not really making you read some long thing in her journal, so again, I think journals can be very informative, but I love it when people use a little snippet, one, two, three sentences, not pages, because it's just hard to read, and staying with letters. I like little snippets from letters, but they're very intimate to you, the writer, so oftentimes writers are a little bit more enchanted with their own journals and their own letters than readers tend to be, so that's just something to keep in mind.

I thought I had another example, but Linda Joy, you're up for Sue William Silverman, The Great.

Linda Joy: Yes. I've been teaching her books for years here and through NAMW, and this is just so interesting what she does. She has a word at the front of every chapter. There's a word, and then she defines it and she reflects on it, and then goes into her writing, and so additive: remote, secret, hidden. And then this is still above the regular text.

> *Surely one way to outsmart death is by deciphering abditive messages in mementos, keepsakes, paintings, or even in everyday belongings simply left behind*.

Then she says:

> After rummaging around in a corner of a desk I inherited from my mother…I find a sheet of typewriter carbon paper sticking to the runners…

Then she proceeds to examine the paper and explore it and looking at and interpreting what she finds there. I thought that was really clever, especially as a device all the way across the beginnings of all of the chapters. Again, it repeats, and she's having fun for sure, picking these words and exploring them. That's the kind of writer she is; she's so creative.

Brooke: I think also what we're getting at almost in this whole class is that many of these books, all of these books do have plots. Things are happening, but they're breaking it up with thinking and all kinds of things that maybe are supplemental to the plot and give the reader brain candy in a way, things to think about that are not necessarily so directly focused on the propulsion of the plot. That doesn't mean it's not happening, and I think that's really what I'm thinking of when I'm reading these memoirs, just that writers are wanting to do other writerly things that are not only about this very specific chronological storytelling or whatever it might be.

We talked about journals, and *Brain on Fire* is so interesting because she has all of the source material from when she had a virus, and she integrates it into her book in this

way, her actual writing during that time*: insomnia, visions, people are something. They'll do anything, maybe desperate or something*. But it's kind of fun to see how she uses this stuff from her time in the hospital because she's actually piecing together what happened to her. So it's not that different from what Julie Metz was doing when Julia was saying, "I'm not even alive, and I'm exploring and trying to figure this out." Well, Susannah was under, and she came out of this brain trauma not remembering what had happened. So in many ways she's also excavating her own journey without any facts beyond what people are telling her and what she has of her own source material, so it's super interesting. So records and documents, the same thing I said about *Purge*. I just like how she does this. This is from where she checked herself into rehab. I love the blotting out and how we use that as part of the cover design as well, so there's continuity in that that I think is really fun. Then you're actually seeing the documentation from the hospital, and you can certainly do that depending on what your story is. We have some photo examples.

Linda Joy: I do a lot of amateur photography through the years. In the old days, what about birds? No, no, no, we can't use birds. It's all changed, and it's been changing to be able to use visual imagery in various books. This is by Lilly Dancyger. I don't know what that is, "our pin." She's reflecting on something she has an image of…

Brooke: It's a rusted beer bottle cap razor blade with a safety pin set in putty.

Linda Joy: Sounds frightening. She's reflecting upon this. Annie is in the imaging, which is quite powerful.

This is the Ingrid Rojas Contreras book, *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*. She's supplementing the text, not with less photo inserts, but like an illustration of text with the photographs. It's very powerful to see the intimacy of a real photograph, and also it's very artistically done, and I believe it does enhance the context in which we're reading the story itself.

Brooke: Where photos are concerned, to some extent your publisher will have some say in this. We're very conscientious that she writes, for instance, about putting in images that actually make sense. Sometimes people want to scrapbook their memoir, and that's not usually a go, but in the place where it offers context, it can be very compelling. I love this one because Rojas Contreras is from Colombia, and this is so epic, this image of her grandparents. It's so of an era, so if you have things like that it can be very fun, especially if it's historical. This is an amazing memoir, by the way. I really recommend it.

Freedom. This is what this whole class is about. It's why we're excited. We want everybody to know the craft of memoir and to experiment and to see what people are doing and to see how you might make use of some of these things yourself. With that regard in mind, we're going to talk a little bit to the end here, emotional truths versus facts. A lot of what we're teaching here—I don't want to say that they're not factual—but in experimenting, there's a lot of stuff going on that is "Your truth is always subjective." Your way into the truth also might look different.

We've talked about this idea of going at something at an angle, trying things on that maybe are different than you've ever thought about before, perhaps from having read one of these books or just thinking about what we're teaching in class tonight. I just want to reiterate this as we are talking about this class because you are allowed to recreate, and we talk about this in our longer classes a lot. How things "would have been" or how they "would have happened," and that's because you are not necessarily going to remember every single incidental detail that happened twenty years ago or even five years ago, for that matter, but you know the players and you know what would have happened, and you lived your life. It is important to be thinking about that as you go.

This is creative nonfiction. You do get to have some reimagining scene recreation, recreating dialogue, of course, because unless you have a home movie of every scene that has ever played out in your life, you have to recreate dialogue. So I just want to draw upon that point that "this is the terrain of memoir." As long as we're talking about freedom and permission, it certainly needs to be said, and what we're enjoying about the books that

we're teaching is that we think that all of these memoirs are finding new and fun ways to do that.

Linda Joy: Again, I think we have our own associations and our own way of tuning in to what we want to express and how we want to choose words and images to express it. For me, I did do a lot of meditating on photographs and looking at them and imagining and guessing what was going on in the background, things like that, really looking deeply into my mother and grandmother as young women. They had some pretty rough years later in their lives with me and with them. I enjoyed going to into their pasts, what they looked like in the past and wondering what their hopes and dreams were given everything that happened later, so I did use things, and we can all do that, take a photograph and show the photograph and all this stuff. It is a window into the past, and I used it particularly in *Song of the Plains*, but also in my first book, *Don't Call Me Mother* because when you're not with people and you have a photograph, sometimes that's all you have of them, so it has a lot of meaning.

The whole idea of this freedom to get all tangled up, the freedom to find ways of also untangling our thoughts and our expectations and even maybe ways we pull ourselves back, "I can't do that," and most memoir writers now—Brooke and I talk about this in class—to try some of these things, to maybe in traditional publishing we might be worried about traditional authors saying, "No, you can't don't that," where people are revealing to you. Many of them are well-known authors, but we're enjoying this whole freedom to imagine new forms and how fragments can really deliver a different experience. It opens up the possibility of other people who are reading their own associations, their own experiences. I feel it allows for a lot of creative things to happen inside with words and on the page.

Brooke: I'm just trying this on, but it makes sense to me because of Ingrid Rojas Contreras. A lot of people have called her book magical realism and, of course, she's from the land of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and she said *that for us the surreal is real. It's not magical realism; it's just my way of experience,* and so it's super fascinating to think about that perhaps what

we're seeing in memoir is a result of the total explosion of writers of color on this theme. There's just been so many different storytelling traditions, and we've been so locked in this Western mindset. That's one of the critiques that Jane Allison was giving, that we've learned the canons, and it's supposed to be done this way, and there's this white male thing of doing everything. Now, I think what's happening is, well, no. There are other storytelling traditions, and so that to me feels part of why we're seeing so much of this now. Yes, your publisher can say that doesn't work or I don't like that, but it's very possible in the past people would have said Ingrid's book was a novel; they wouldn't have let it be a memoir, but it very much is marketed as a memoir today. So, I think that also is just showing a progression in our thinking.

Linda Joy: A question: "I wonder about writing from the other person's perspective as you look at the photo and writing from her mother's perspective." Absolutely. What is she saying to you in the photograph? Let her speak. Imagine what she's saying. We can use our imagination. We're going to talk next week about meaning, and we use our imagination to explore meaning, and we speculate. Write all that down if that's coming to you and don't pre-censor.

Brooke: Pre-censor, exactly, and then post-censor. I want to grab that comment before we lose it above the fold. Question: "What about photos set in lieu of quotes at the beginning of chapters?" I love that. I think that's going to be something that your publisher would have to say yes to, but I would certainly say yes to something like that as long as it made sense. In fact, we have a book on our list that has that, a photo at the beginning of each chapter that sort of sets the tone, so absolutely.

Try something new. Challenge tonight if you want to. If you're staying to write, by all means give it a go, try on a new form, write a whole scene in the second person. You could try in the third person as Darla was just saying. Why not? Experiment with an imaginative way of speculating about what things would have been like again. You're doing that already to some extent if you're writing memoir, but still someone you didn't know this time

perhaps, like Julie and her grandfather, or Linda Joy did know her grandmother, but still there's this speculative that you're piecing together. Try a list. See what that feels like. I actually am using this myself. I decided around my own separation from my ex that I would try a list of all the things we tried and all the things we didn't try in terms of staying together because I didn't' want to write all those scenes. It felt super tedious, and I thought wouldn't that be interesting to say we did couples therapy; we did this, we did this, what we didn't do was love each other well, all the "no's," so I'm finding that really compelling in terms of trying out my own lists, and they can be anything, and then shaking things up about. There is literally nothing to lose. The worst thing that could happen is someone could tell you that doesn't work.

Linda Joy and I are going to share briefly a little bit of the story of why we're inspired to teach this class in the first place.

Brooke: I shared a little bit already. Maggie Smith did literally blow open my memoir. I want to share this story with you because I think it's quite resonant. I was writing a very chronological story, the way of traditional memoir. I thought it was working well. I like traditional chronological memoir, so it's fine. Then I just felt that it was meh, like it was only fine. That's what I said to a couple of people. "It's fine." That wasn't okay. I kept thinking about publishing it and thinking, "Am I really going to be okay with a book that I feel like is just fine when I'm teaching memoir. I want at least to be able to say I love it even if other people don't. I was already thinking about that in this very stuck place, and then I listened to Maggie's book, and I was like what the hell is she doing. This is amazing. I called Linda Joy—you're not going to believe this—and I threw away all the words that I had written. Then I ordered the book because I wanted to look at it, and then I started thinking "Yeah, this is really fascinating," and she's not alone. It was just that Maggie hit me in that moment. Then that's what opened up my eyes to start looking at all of these different books, many of which I had already read like Carmen Maria Machado's, but looking at in a different way of, "Oh, they're playing with structure and form." So that was fine, and now I'm

writing a fragmented memoir. It feels a million times better. I'm liking it better. It's more me, and I feel less confined.

Linda Joy: I wanted you to go first because that's the order in which all this happened was that Brooke was blown away by Maggie Smith, and then she calls me and starts telling me about Maggie Smith. I read Maggie Smith and all of a sudden there's been a story I've been sort of trying to write but could not figure out how to really write it. I had a first love and he was in both of my memoirs, but our family broke us up. We'd stayed friends of a sort all through our lives: a few phone calls, a couple of meetings, but not much time together at all. I had spent thirty years dreaming about him, and the most significant dreams happened where I kept dreaming that we would get together. In the last dream we got together, and he fell down and died at my feet. So I said to myself, "Oh, my gosh, I better call him and find out how he's feeling." He was in hospice. So we had a meeting for two days to figure out what happened in the fifty-three years of our friendship and our relationship and most of it is not a story as such. It's not a traditional narrative, and I always knew it was a fragmented story, but when Brooke was excited about Maggie Smith and I read these other things, I went "oh." So the other day I sat down with some of my fragments, and they started writing themselves. I'm calling it the accidental memoir.

Brooke: You can't stay away. You have two loves, historical fiction and memoir.

Linda Joy: I'm writing both right now.

Brooke: Thanks for listening to that. We wanted to share just because, again, that does happen. In the comments for those of you who aren't following, I was laughing about having thrown away those words. I did keep the words. They're in a file. They're just called "old memoir," but Mary Karr famously threw away the first and second versions of *Lit*. I do love this story because she said in the first version he was all wrong. In the second version I was

all wrong, and in the third version it was both our faults. So sometimes you have to process through those things.

Linda Joy: In *Song of the Plains* I had 85,000 words of the book I'd written and I went, "No, it's not right," so I started over. Sometimes we have to do it. Dorothy Allison lost her entire manuscript at a bus stop, and she had to start over. There are some people who talk about how they come at something very differently in a refreshingly different way when they let go of something that isn't quite working. It happens.

Brooke: Yes. It does, and it's good to look at. Nancy, I'm looking at your comment. "Same for me, meh." I know you're writing, Nancy, and it's phenomenal, but I think you want to look at that and say what can I do here, what is missing? What do I need to add to this to make it be how I feel good about it. That also is helpful to keep you on track.

Next week is the final class, "The meaning below the meaning below the meaning," and so much to get into there, and also, of course, one of our absolute favorite topics of all time, which is reflection and more.

Class 4: The Meaning Below the Meaning Below the Meaning

Brooke: Welcome to the final class of Evolution of Memoir. Week 4 is The Meaning Below the Meaning Below the Meaning.

Linda Joy: This is something you and I love to teach ongoingly, but looking at how these particular authors did that all in such different ways.

Brooke: We're going to dive into reflection and takeaway tonight, primarily. And subtext.

Linda Joy: We thought we'd go through some discussion of what we mean by these words, the word "reflection," how we've been teaching it, and how we look at some examples for how these authors ae using reflection, and each in such a unique way.

Reflection is about digging in, thinking, reflecting, musing, trying to make sense of what you're experiencing. This means that you're going beyond what's happening to your inner story, and we want the reader to understand the meaning to you of the events that you're writing about, what they mean to you, how you make sense of them. The way I explain this to people in notes and coaching is that I see what happens and ask: what's the inner story? I want to know the inner story of your experiences in the scene and other scenes. So it's woven into what's happening; it's part of it and reveals a deeper emotional angle. When the reader—and this is what matters—understands your inner emotional story, that's the main story that they're tracking in memoir is what happened, and then what sense did you make of it, how did you feel about it, what's going on inside you. We'll show you some examples here today.

There are ways to use reflection. You might make some conclusion based on an interaction or something that just happened. You might be speculating what if this happens, or what about such and such, or musing in ways to talk about it. I wonder what will happen if I do X or Y. That's part of making sense of something that just occurred, and

you may not know what to do next or even how to think about it. Or it could be explaining something, presenting an idea—we're going to look at some examples today—about something. This is all a way that a reader gets to know you. You are the protagonist. This is what you think and feel, and the lens through which you look at the world, and it's an emotional world also; it's perception and emotion. Of course, we all perceive however we perceive. We might even think there's no other way to perceive, but it's really powerful to let the reader know more. Usually most people that we're coaching as we're reading their work need to do a little more of this. And, there needs to be balance.

Again, it's your personal take through your eyes. You can handle this by pausing at the end of some action, something that happened, people were doing things, you're doing things, and say to yourself, "What sense do I make of this thing?" And in deeper layers of planning and memoir development we ask: why does this scene need to be here. It needs to be there not only because of what happened, but also because of what you're doing with it in your inner story. So you're letting the reader know how you feel and what you think.

And again, a lot of times we tell writers *you need to slow down*. It's not so much about remembering the past. How did you feel at 9:00, 10:00 in the morning in 1954? You're not going to know, but you just wrote a scene about something significant that you feel happened to you on that day in 1954, and that scene is there because it fits with your theme, and it's something significant enough to include.

Therefore, you will sit down after writing that scene and ask yourself, "What sense do I make of it now?" Not that you can write it from the now point of view, but you just wrote this scene. What are my emotions? Where am I in my emotions about this moment that I wrote now? So we tune into being able to do this not by memory, but by understanding who we are and revealing who we are as protagonist characters on the page. You can get there through sensory details here that are in the scene. What was it like to live the scene? Where does it fit in your body? What comes up for you emotionally? So it's about accessing it from the scene you just wrote and doing your best to take it further. Most people need to take it a little further, right, Brooke?

Brooke: Yes, largely. Every once in a while we have memoirists in our classes who say, "I know I reflect more than I story tell." Sometimes a story will lend itself to that. There are very internal stories, I would even say certain stories that are highly character focused, like maybe a mother/daughter story that's a lot about the dynamics, for instance. I was thinking of E. J. Koh and her book because when Sue brought up subtext, E. J.'s book is called *The Magical Language of Others*, and it's so subtle and lovely and reflective. You'll see books like that, so we certainly don't want to suggest there's a formula, but you're right. In our experience, people need to reflect more.

Linda Joy: I think a lot of it is because we're trying so hard early on to think about what happened and when and what is the plot version. We can get caught up in that, but we're inviting you to reflect and feel, and it may take some time to get in there and really be able to develop that. This is what was fun, looking through these books that we're teaching. With each author there were longer stories, meaning they were more than a page and more than a vignette, more of an arc to them. Each of the authors did that, and we'll show you some examples. There were also fragments, moments that were either fragmented completely or a sentence or two or three, or more like a vignette, which is shorter than a story and longer than a fragment. Then using different points of view, using first person sometimes, "I", second "you," and "we" sometimes.

First person "I", sometimes plural "we", and then third person "he, she" is the way they were handling them.

Brooke: Before we move on to examples, I'm going to pile on with takeaway, and then we're going to share some examples of both kinds of writing. For those of you who have taken our long course, this will feel familiar because we teach takeaway inside of reflection always. The way that we think takeaway is that it's a form of reflection. This is quite important to think that everything that Linda Joy just taught is embedded into what takeaway is. It's an outward reflection. Reflection is asking what sense do I make of this and how does it

matter to me. Why is this relevant to my story? What context is it offering to the reader about my story.

Takeaway asks for something broader. Takeaway asks what context can I offer that has to do with a broader story or a universal story. What we love about takeaway in terms of its offerings to the reader is that it really connects because it's taking into consideration your story as the writer, but also a broader human story or a broader cultural story. You might be part of an identity group. That could have to do with your sexual orientation. It could have to do with part of the country you're from. It could have to do with your nationality, your racial or ethnic background. We are all made up of so many different identities, and what takeaway helps us to do is put ourselves inside a broader identity than just ourselves. It could be the identity of motherhood. It could be the identity of athlete. So there are all these different things that we feel, and it's not just about identity. I'm putting that out there because it's an easy place to position yourself. It's about experience, but we tend to have experience within the context of our identities, of course. It's this way to talk about these bigger picture messages, shared human experiences, personal philosophies, musings. Sometimes it's facts and statistics, and sometimes it's teaching, so it's all these different tools that we have at our disposal to paint onto the page in a way that takes us out of the eye and really begins to think more broadly how can I make sense of what I'm talking about right now in the context of a bigger picture.

It's always the easiest to show this by way of example, but all of our books, of course, are doing this. Many of them are touching into themes. If you think about what the book is about, Maggie Smith's specifically since we have two Maggies, is about divorce and motherhood. A lot of her takeaways are going to touch upon the identity of motherhood and what it feels like to be divorced, and this concept of family. That's just one example. There's more to come.

How do you use takeaway in memoir? It is about your themes, and we have chosen some really great books that do help us to think about themes. Obviously, Maggie Nelson's book *Bluets*. We've been talking about how the book talks about blue as a theme, but it's also the meaning of blue, and the cultural constructs of blue, and how people think about

blue. So there's all this stuff already baked in to takeaway automatically because she's taking a color and making meaning out of color. So what she's essentially doing in this book is a lot of takeaway and reflection. It's connecting readers to a message. How boring would Maggie Nelson's book be if it were actually just about blue, the color. It certainly is not that. It's about so much more layer of meaning in all the different representations of blue. If you think about Carmen Maria Machado's book, it's about domestic abuse, a very hard topic, but lots of us are writing about her topics, and also questions of why she stayed and how did this happen. In some ways it's a similar kind of unpacking to Maggie Smith's book, but she uses a lot of takeaway in the form of popular culture, research. She's making connections to say that there's a little bit of a stereotype in lesbian relationships that there's not domestic abuse but, of course, it happens all the same. So there's some myth that she's looking to dispel as well.

Takeaway is a mirror also, and it's a different kind of mirror in that it explicitly tries to point a message outward. If you think about reflection and takeaway, you could have those double-sided mirrors. One is looking at you, and the other is looking outward, and it is a very similar kind of experience. One is helping the writer to get deeper into their own understandings and conceptions about things, and the other is looking outward into the world and saying what sense do I make of things that are out beyond my personal experience, or it is my personal experience, but importantly it's a shared personal experience. That's where you find your entry points for takeaway.

The skill of takeaway does ask you to get a little deeper into your ideas about things, about musing. When I talk with my coaching clients, sometimes I'll ask them, "What do you think about that?"

I spent quite a bit of time today with someone trying to make sense of her own experience with her mother. She's seventy years old, and there are things that I know she's still piecing together. That's true for all of us. What's really exciting about memoir is all of a sudden you go, "Oh, my gosh. I hadn't thought about things in that way before, but yes, that's true."

What we're talking about today is I can ask you a question about an experience that you've had and say, "Does that resonate? Does that feel true?" You will be able to answer the question, "Yes, it does," or "No, it doesn't."

There's a way in which takeaway is like an inquiry, deeper and deeper into your own experience and how you understand things. It is the realm of ideas because it's not just about this thing happened, and this is what its meaning was. You want to keep excavating, keep going down and down further so that you're thinking, "Oh, my gosh, yes, I haven't thought about it this way before. I'm articulating this a little bit differently this time."

This reflection and takeaway stuff is really an invitation for you to go into the realm of meaning and ideas, and that's why we're talking about the meaning below the meaning below the meaning, because if anyone has ever done an inquiry practice, you know that it doesn't stop with one question. Lots of times an inquiry practice is why was that important to you, and then you answer, and then you ask again why was that important to you, and you answer again. Then you answer back again and again because the reason that that kind of practice works is because every time you answer, you answer differently and you answer with more depth and more understanding.

For some of you, it might simply be a good practice to get deeper into reflection and deeper into takeaway by adopting an inquiry practice that simply asks, "What do I think about what just unfolded here?" so you're not just scurrying off, being like a super meaningful thing happened, and now I'm out of here. The super meaningful think happened, and I'm going to talk to you about it for a while. This is the reason that we're here together in your memoir space, and it's meaningful.

Techniques of takeaway are a little different than reflection, but also overlapping, to be clear. Sometimes Linda Joy and I might read something and ask, "Oh, is that reflection or takeaway?" The primary reason that we'll categorize something as takeaway is because of that outer-orientedness. So when I get to my sections of sharing I'll be sure to point it out. Lots of the ways that the authors we've chosen for this class are doing their takeaway is through poeticism, through their fragments, their musings, their way of making sense about things that are broader in nature, also finding ways to connect to the universal

experience. For me, this is the number one, actually. What happened to you that makes your experience universal?

We have a guy on our SparkPress list who's writing a memoir about epilepsy. Epilepsy is very specific. It pertains to people who have epilepsy, but there are a lot of universal human experiences that he gets into that are resonant to anyone: the fear, the needing to go through something profound and come out the other side, the desire to go back to the way things were, the sense of feeling out of control, of losing control of your senses or your consciousness sometimes. These are things that people can relate to even if they don't have that particular condition. That's what you're looking to build upon. That's what makes something universal that you help people to understand your experience even if they have not experienced it; very importantly, not to think that your experience is so unique or so precious that people can't possibly understand. That's the opposite of what you're going for even if you have something very explicit that you're inviting people into your world.

Writing outwardly is not from a first person experience even if it is your experience, but you will find yourself writing from a more collective spot. That might mean that you use the word "we." It might mean that you go into the second person for the purpose of you, this; you that. There are two different ways of doing second person, as you guys know. One is taking the first person writing and changing the actual point of view, but you're writing about your experience in the "you". That is second person writing, which is different than talking to the reader. You can be a little bit confusing because there are so many different ways to implement the technique in our writing, and you want to be mindful of the different ways that you use "you" and how you're harnessing it.

Speculation, interpretation, and making a broader sense of what happened—the next layer. I highlighted "broader" because that's similar to what Linda Joy said. She was talking about speculation and interpretation and making meaning. All of that stuff is happening in takeaway, but it's happening in this broader context that I'm talking about. There's a way in which you pull out of the "I" for a little while, and you move into this almost potentially philosophical way of writing your work. More to come. We'll dive into it as we get

into the examples because, obviously, those can be helpful for putting a pin on what we're trying to teach tonight.

We're going to toggle back over to reflection.

Linda Joy: All the authors use reflection, certainly Abigail Thomas does a lot, but I chose a couple that were particular to her, and she says on page 105:

Here's what I love about dogs. They aren't careful not to disturb you. They don't overthink. They jump on the bed or the sofa or the chair and plop down. They come and they go. I'm not sure they love me exactly, but they count on me because I am a source of heat and food…Dogs don't wake up on the wrong side of the bed. There is no wrong side of the bed for a dog…

While we, the audience, can take in for ourselves what she's saying about dogs, it's written as a reflection, her personal experience, her personal reflection. But what's fun about it is that we go, "Oh, yes, dogs." We might translate it to cats. We do things with what people are musing about ourselves and make it our own, but she's very clear she's not being general, and a lot of her book is very full of particular reflections about her life, about the various themes which include alcohol and her friend Chuck and her daughter and life and death itself. There are quite a few themes rolling through that book.

The next one picks up on one of those themes. She says:

I think about time differently since I got to be this old. I think of each moment as a big La-Z-Boy or perhaps a hammock, and the only direction is a little back and forth. For this I need peace and quiet…I appreciate that the advantage of getting old is you don't want to mess around anymore…

She goes on to muse how she doesn't like to mess with certain complications in life, which is rather delightful to read about what she means. She wants to decide how emotional she wants to be given certain movies, and she starts to reflect about that. Whereas we might relate: "Oh, yeah, that's true about watching movies," she goes into it very specifically.

This is from *Bluets,* Maggie Nelson. This is a reflection that's personal, and yet we access the topic of being lost and wondering about God here in the whole thing, not just in the example on page 54:

I have also imagined my life ending or simply evaporating by being subsumedinto a tribe of blue people. I dreamed of these blue people as a child, long before I knew that such people actually existed. Now I know that they do, in the eastern and central Sahara desert, and that they are called Tuareg, which means 'abandoned by God.' I also know that many Westerners have shared in this fantasy…

She goes on, and we learn a lot about these blue people in other vignettes that she includes, and you could say then she moves into takeaway, which is probably true. I didn't analyze the rest of them. But we know that she dreamed about them, and her whole book being about blue, it's one of those ways that she enters into her own interest in the way the color blue has affected her.

Fragments again. These are some fragments. This is certainly not a vignette. It's not a story. It's a thought.

I am writing all this down in blue ink, so as to remember that all words, not just some, are written in water.

The next ones, I thought these were interesting:

Perhaps, in time, I will also stop missing you.

Woven throughout the whole book are vignettes, stories, fragments, and reflections about this lover that she is mourning.

Ocean Vuong. I felt this was interesting about the way he makes sense of this moment with his mother. This is early in the book. He's setting up the characters in the book this early.

That time when I was five or six I leapt out shouting, "Boo!" You screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs…I stood bewildered…I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you…that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom.

One of the themes throughout this whole book is the Vietnam War, both very personally about his mother, about his relationship with her, and then there are some thematic elements about the war that had to do with Tiger Woods and his family, interestingly enough. Now he's looking at the word "rose" His mother's name is Rose. He opens this up a little bit.

Rose. Only when I utter the word do I realize that rose is also the past tense of rise. That in calling your name I'm also telling you to get up…as if a name is also a sound that we can be found in. Where am I? Where am I? You're Rose, Ma. You have risen.

So you can see that both of these examples are very, very personal reflection, and he does a lot of personal reflection all the way through his book.

Brooke: All of these are master memoirists, and there's so much reflection and so much takeaway in their books. Hopefully, that's helpful. One of the things is, I think beginning to have the recognition to be able to see it and to absorb it, and I actually recommend to people when they're just learning about reflection and takeaway, to highlight their books, to go through and say okay, this is this, and I'll highlight it in green. This is this, and I'll highlight it in purple, just for sake of metabolizing a little bit to recognize what you're even seeing so that you can begin to try it on in your own writing.

Linda Joy: The last of the examples in this course, Maggie Smith's book has been amazing for many others, for Brooke and me also. She has so many ways of bringing in her reflections, again, from little lines and fragments to vignettes to full stories, somewhat full. They're all short, but she uses several.

One of them is the way she does her titles that weave all the way through it. One of them is *How I Picture It*. It's a reflection. It's in italics also, so that's another way she's letting us know. It's a different typeface, and it's the same all the way through. *How I Picture It* is always in italics.

She has other titles, too, but another one I thought was interesting, a note on foreshadowing. She's playing with the idea of what do you know and when do you not know things, and when do you find them out, when do you just sense them. That's the kind of thing she is actually trying to make sense of, so it's a theme, foreshadowing, and a title, and so one little bit here is:

It's a mistake to think of one's life as plot, but there's foreshadowing everywhere.

Of course, she's a writer and she thinks about thought, and she does a little play on the whole thing all the way through, actually.

Then she uses metaphor here to reflect on plot, which I thought was nice to remind us of the different techniques that you can use.

How I picture it—that life—the past, the beforelife, the before math— was a boat. I was on it with my husband, and later our daughter joined us and still later, our son.

Then she goes on, and she talks about the water looks and how you look down in it and you can see things reflected in the water that you don't really realize are there, and she goes off on the boat and water metaphor.

Brooke: A student said, "It's very meta," which is exactly the words I used when I was interviewing her for our podcast because I found that, too. Sometimes, I would say that's takeaway, but it could be reflection.

Like we said, there's some blurring of the lines here. If that word resonates with you, "meta," it can be that for sure, but it's important to remember that Maggie is doing this thing that we talked about in Class 1, which is the writer point of view. The writer point of view is a meta point of view, and meta just means high level. In fiction it would be omniscient, and

Linda Joy specifically said, “Maybe we don’t go there because we don’t want to confuse people, but it is important to understand it and to be able to recognize it when you see it.” For those of you who saw the *Barbie* movie, meta is when we come into that place and the founder of Barbie is there, and she starts talking to Rhea Perlman. Wait. You founded this company, and I’m up here on the high level. It’s a meta conversation because it takes you out of the story and has this omniscient, God-like way of speaking about things. I want to be clear that not all memoir does that. In order to do it, you do have to be pretty skillful because it does what we call “break the fictive dream.” So if you’re doing it intentionally, and Maggie does it brilliantly, it can be quite effective. It can also be frustrating depending on how it’s handled, so you want to be mindful of that and conscientious, so this is what’s exciting. People are trying new things. It’s a brave new world out there with how we’re thinking about narration.

Let’s look at *Breathe*. These examples are takeaways. What’s interesting about *Breathe* and other books that are letters to people like Ocean Vuong is writing a letter to his mom at times. Kiese Laymon is writing to his mother. In *Breathe*, Imani Perry is writing to her son. So when she says, “People want to truncate you,” she’s speaking to her son, but she could be speaking to all of us, and that’s what I think makes it a takeaway is that this is high level. It’s her having discourse about the nature of human behavior, so that’s why this would qualify as a takeaway, so I’ll read it:

People want to truncate you. It happens to all of us human beings. We are victimsof the shorthand schemas people use to organize the world. There’s no real way around it. Sometimes you’ll make a bold statement claiming the fullness of your being, and it will feel essential and groundbreaking. And then you’ll walk outside or inside and be reminded that the shortcut is back. As unpleasant as it is, keep in mind that life is so full of information, the shorthand shortcut is something we all do to manage things, but you do not have to submit to the shorthand that would make you a fiction.

She’s talking about race, but let’s be clear, this could be about any way that you get shorthanded, and that’s what I’m saying. You could be talking about something, but other people are putting in their points of resonance. That’s how takeaway works because it’s you

and she's asking you to step in and think about how she is thinking about things through her lens, but it's a broader lens than just her lens. This is exactly what I'm talking about in terms of the mirror turned outward. She's talking about one thing, but it's resonant across, kind of like a ripple effect, and that's what makes it quite beautiful.

As I said, this book, *In the Dream* House, those of you who have read it know it's about domestic abuse, and so here she's writing about that. This is takeaway about her theme:

A narrative needs two things to be a gothic romance. The first, "woman plus habitation."

"Horror," film theorist Mary Ann Doane writes, "which should by rights be external to domesticity, infiltrates the home." The house is not essential for domestic abuse, but hell, it helps: a private space where private dramas are enacted behind, as the cliché goes, closed doors; but also windows sealed against the sound, drawn curtains, silent phones. A house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears.

Why is this takeaway? Because she is talking about things in very high level terms. She's talking about the nature of domestic abuse and where it plays out, and she's evoking the house, which is the domain of domestic abuse by and large, and her book is *In the Dream House*, and it's a lot about the things that happen behind closed doors. She does this over and over again, the meaning, the loaded meaning below the meaning. She keeps going ever deeper. There's a corkscrew effect, and people will say, "I only have so much to say about my topic or my theme," but you can go in so many different directions with a curious mind. This is a great book to look at for that because the way that she writes about abuse is all over the place. She is pulling from scholars. She is pulling from pop culture, movies, books, characters, all kinds of things, and she's weaving it into this epic musing in between a plot.

One of you said earlier this was astute. A. says, "Interesting memoir has always been braided plot plus reflection." Yes, some form of those two things, and it's seamless, though, because to go back to Class 1, we had the three narrative styles.

The one was writer, unusual, meta, omniscient. The other two are the "I" and the "I"; "I" the character and "I" the reflector.

So these are two comingling narrative voices that are central to memoir, and you can do both. The "I" that is the narrator is not always speaking in the "I".

Here's a good example. She doesn't use the word "I" here. I think you all want to be looking to portions of books where "I" falls out. It's nice sometimes, because a memoir is I, I, I, I, I, but occasionally, if there are some moments where there's no "I," it's about balance.

Linda Joy: It can feel refreshing. People ask us about this. Every sentence there's "I." What should I do?

Brooke: Abigail, she's so delightful. I just love this little vignette so much. This is the whole thing. This is the whole chapter:

Too Much

Yesterday, May first, there was too much green and pink and yellow. There was no escaping the loveliness, the delicacy. Beauty assaulted me on every front like a breaking wave, no, a tsunami of yellow; the old magnolia exploding into pink and white; like grenades; blue sky—there was no escape from all this beauty. I was being force fed a spring morning. Even the oxygen was divine, so finally I went inside and watched The Exorcist.

I love it. Why is this takeaway? She's taking on this description. Again, this could be between reflection and takeaway. A lot of her stuff is reflection. But like I said, takeaway is a form of reflection, but why I thought this was takeaway is because it's really quite descriptive, and it is this way of deepening you into the idea of too much, which is really what it's about. So if you think about things in their containers like that, are you speaking to a theme? Are you writing about something again that other people can resonate with, this idea that too much is too much, too much of a good thing even. So I think that's what I like about her writing so much is that a lot of what she is doing is thematic in nature, and reflection and takeaway are both accessed often through theme. That's an important thing

to remember. What are you writing about? How can you access your reflection and your takeaway? By constantly coming back to your themes.

This is one that you probably remember, and we have spoken to it. This is just a resonant moment from Maggie's book.

How I picture it: We are all nesting dolls, carrying the earlier iterations of ourselves inside. We carry the past inside us. We take ourselves—all of our selves—wherever we go.

Look at the "we." She's inviting you in to think about this alongside her. Then she goes into herself:

Inside forty-something me is the woman I was in my thirties, the woman I was in my twenties, the teenager I was, the child I was. Inside divorced me: married me, the me who loved my husband, the me who believed what we had was irrevocable and permanent, the me who believed in permanence. I still carry these versions of myself. It's a kind of reincarnation without death: all these different lives we get to live in this one body, as ourselves.

It's so beautiful. When I finished reading this book there were lots of moments I thought of, but this was one that has stayed, has had this resonant effect. But look how she starts.

How I picture it: We are all nesting dolls

So that first paragraph is in the "we." Then she goes on to articulate, Inside me is this kind of woman; inside me is this kind of woman. I still carry these. But then she moves back into the "we."

All these different lives we get to live in this one body, as ourselves.

Playing with these points of view, these first person/second person/third person in toggling and knowing that you get to seamlessly come in and out. Be mindful because I have read a book where the "yous" were out of control, like no lanes. That can be problematic because, again, you have to know what you're doing. "We" is a little easier. "You" is different in a sometimes problematic way because there are multiple ways to use "you." Just be careful.

I wrote a Substack piece about this, and talked about the various ways to use "you." I love it, though, when writers are facile with moving into "we" and "you" and back to "I" in a way that works, and you are not even thinking about it because there's this way in which the writer is enrolling you into their story that you're like, "Oh, me. Now I'm paying attention because you've been I, I, I, I, I, and I'm enjoying your story, but then you say 'you,' and all of a sudden I'm like, "Oh, you're talking to me?" It stops the momentum a little bit and shifts the attention of the reader, so it's very powerful.

Q: Have you ever seen a memoir with two authors, every other chapter telling a different angle of the same story?

We published a mother/daughter memoir. It's been a long time now, but they both had addiction, and the mother was talking about her passing down her addiction to her daughter, and the daughter was talking about it from her perspective, so that was quite interesting because it was very specific.

Linda Joy: What about the man and his son? They each wrote a book, though, I think.

Brooke: *Beautiful Boy*, and his son's book is called *Tweaked*, also about drugs and addiction. There are books where someone is telling a story from their parents' point of view. *Raising Fences* is a famous book where he writes his own sections, and then he writes his mother's sections, but he's a single author.

Linda Joy: *The Color of Water* does that, too.

Brooke: Right. That's an interesting approach.

Linda Joy: Christian Fellows mentions Sue Monk Kidd's *Traveling with Pomegranates* she wrote with her daughter.

Brooke: "Another use of second person is addressing another person in the story as a kind of reflection." Do you want to say more about that, Susan?

Q: In the memoir I'm writing right now I talk to the other main character as "you," but it's reflecting on the relationship by talking to him directly, so that's another way of using second person.

Brooke: Right. It's sort of like what Kiese Laymon does in his book *Heavy*, where he's talking to his mother, and it's different, because Ocean Vuong and Imani are really explicitly writing letters, and in this case you're speaking to another...

There's really a lot of creative stuff. I'm also going to post my Substack post about "Five Different Ways to Use You in Memoir," because like I said, it does get a little unwieldy.

"How many themes are typical and ideals in a memoir?" Linda Joy.

Linda Joy: I don't know. I don't think there's a rule about it, but I think it needs to be clear. It's a little bit like juggling or even take that scene and take it all the way through, and how many themes do that with. Do you think there's a general way or set of ideas about that, Brooke?

Brooke: I think there can be too many themes, which makes it hard for you as a writer to make meaning and to craft your story because you have too many things on your plate. But I remember when we taught Frank McCourt's book, *Angela's Ashes*. He had all of these themes going on because it was the Catholic church and alcoholism and abuse, and it seemed like so many things, but it was this coming of age story about growing up in Ireland. This is not funny, but we joked that it was all about his miserable Irish childhood. We were saying that was his theme.

His umbrella theme encompassed all of these things that he was trying to write about, and that's not really a theme, a miserable childhood, but underneath all of it, he's pulling all these different threads. As long as they intersect, then definitely.

Linda Joy: He did, he juggled them all the way through and wove them together. We learned about poverty, and we learned about alcoholism. We learned what all that does to people.

Brooke: I think one to three themes is probably better because I'm going to react to Darla's "everything goes." I don't think it's quite that because it is everything goes, I guess, if you know what you're doing. There's a certain truth of understanding the fundamentals here of knowing how to write a scene, of being in control of your reflection versus your scene writing, understanding your narrators, because I read a lot of manuscripts that are finished, and people are like I know something is wrong, but I don't know what. When I diagnose those manuscripts there's a lot of stuff that is not working. It varies in terms of what it is, but part of that is a little bit of that willy nilly. I just throw myself into this and see what happens. Then you realize, of course, you need to know the craft.

Let's talk about reflecting in the child's point of view because I think that that's important. Jamiya's saying metaphor could take the place of reflection. That's an interesting question. I'm sure that it could be additive, but child perspectives do reflect. Takeaway is a little more sophisticated, and so it might be the case that you're not making these grand observations about cultural context from a child's point of view, but children reflect.

Linda Joy: Children reflect, and remember the writer. The writer can create a scene from a child's point of view that shows the reader what the bigger things are without the child directly thinking it. It's the words chosen. I talk about my book *Don't Call Me Mother*, about w riting scenes where the reader gets the tension and gets how unhappy the child is, but the child isn't thinking that. She's just trying to cope with the situation, so it depends on how it's written.

Brooke: I have this one memorized because we teach it in our class, our six-month class, but J. R. Moehringer in *The Tender Bar* reflects all over the place, and he's a young boy, but

he has this moment where he's doing something that his mom doesn't want him to do, and she says something about it. Then the reflective sentence is, "I could tell at that moment that I could be as much of a mystery to my mother as she was to me."

Now that is reflection, and it's through the eyes of a ten-year-old. Is it sophisticated for a ten-year-old? Yes, for sure, but there's a certain sort of freedom, creative license that you as the writer get to bring in to showcase the sense that you're making of a situation even in a childhood narration. That might be a little different if you're four or five-years-old, but certainly I would read more coming of age and do the exercise of highlighting what you think is reflection.

Linda Joy: I like what S. is saying about the child writer describing experiences in a sensory fashion. You can do both, but children are very sensorially oriented, so describing an experience through the senses, which is what I was thinking about in my example. The reader gets it: This is tense; this is difficult, without saying "I felt" or "I thought." You just show it, so it's a showing more than telling kind of thing that you can also do.

Brooke: J. is asking, "How many themes does Maggie Smith have in addition to divorce and motherhood, which would be the primary to perhaps opposition to patriarchy?"

If we deconstruct a given book, we might be able to find multiple themes or themes within themes, themes inside the themes. I do think divorce and motherhood are the two primary themes, but underneath that I agree with opposition to patriarchy or expectations. I'm sure there are other things that this group could brainstorm, but I think the important thing is that when you write a scene, you want to have enough clarity about what your book is about that you can say, "What does this have to do with my theme?"

If your themes are ten to twenty themes, you're asking yourself too many questions. You want to get more clarity for the sake of this question of aboutism, like what is your book about, because it gives you clarity, so the idea is not to just have as many themes as you can, but really to narrow it for your own sake for a container of your work.

Brooke: "Are there memoirs written for YA?" Yes, for sure. *Anne Frank* is a great example, but definitely there are. Jacqueline Woodson, her book, which is called *Brown Girl Dreaming*, is a beautiful memoir in verse, which is something we haven't even talked about, but that's a thing, a whole book written as poetry. That's an example that pops to mind, but I'm sure there are others.

Linda Joy: Abigail's themes are quite beautiful, like we were saying in this book and all the other books that she writes. She has this kind of style, doesn't she, Brooke?

Brooke: Abby, definitely. Her style is kind of genius, honestly. The way that she's able to distill. I think that's another thing to look at with her is that you're trying to make sense of theme because she has written a book that is about loss. It's about losing her best friend through this process of her daughter and him falling in love and betrayal and confusion, but within her little vignettes she's doing micro-theming, these little micro moments, and they're just packed with meaning. No words are wasted. I think that's such a good exercise for us all because obviously we read a lot of stuff, and sometimes there's a lot of words wasted on the page. Why am I reading this? I want to have that experience of just being everything you read is pertinent. That's the job. The memoirist is in the driver's seat, and asking yourself these questions interrogating your own scenes. That's hard and it takes revision because J. asks this question about, "Do you think expert writers are writing reflection and takeaway along with scene?"

I think you mean in a first draft are they doing that. It's impossible to know, of course, but I imagine the more skilled a person gets, the more they feel that they can write reflection and takeaway in first draft. But certainly in our long class we say yes, you can get the what happened draft down, but the practice of being free that I mentioned, you could drop it into drafts. You can have a conversation with yourself when you're writing a shitty first draft, and at the end say, "Why does this matter? What sense do I make of this?"

Let yourself be in dialogue with yourself about the things that need to get added. If the answer is “I don’t really know,” or “It doesn’t have anything to do with my theme,” or “Maybe this isn’t as interesting as I thought,” maybe you tag it and say okay, this is a B. This is not an A, and we’ll bring it back later kind of thing, so I think that could be a helpful exercise.

Linda Joy: There are a lot of things we need to do to help ourselves get clear on this, including writing a lot of words that maybe we don’t keep, but we experiment and look into how we can develop these things and maybe write that regular scene oriented first draft. Now that everybody’s attended this class, including the way Brooke and I are looking at these books, you go, “Oh, I can do it that way,” or “No, wrong way. I think I can do some of this.”

Brooke: There are some great insights in here. Thank you for your comments. This idea of the sensory, absolutely. Jeannette Walls does that really well. She’s a child in *Glass Castle*, but it’s quite full of meaning. You’re sitting there reading, “Oh, my God, her family is yikes,” but she’s not telling you *there’s something wrong with my family. I love my family, and we’re great,* and it’s really the outside world expressing, “I think there’s something wrong with your dad.” Things that happen: He’s not keeping her safe. He’s doing all this crazy shit to her. There’s that subtext. She doesn’t need to say, “And then I was scared of my dad.” No, she loves her dad, but he’s putting her in all of these dangerous situations, and the reader understands that.

Linda Joy: She makes us scared, which is very skillful.

Brooke: Thank you for this rich conversation.