On the Memoir

By Mikaela O'Brien

Mikaela: [00:00:00] My curiosity about the memoir genre developed last fall in an English seminar on criticism called *Memoir and Memory* at the University of California Berkeley. Guiding questions for the seminar revolved around defining the relationship between memoir and memory, understanding its use for personal empowerment, and setting the memoir apart from adjacent genres like autobiography, fiction and history.

Twice a week, sitting around a relatively small wooden table on the third floor of Wheeler Hall, for every question answered, new ones formed. I gained an invaluable perspective on memoir writing from its history to its present relevance, and I became enthralled by the question of how one narrative devises a life.

My name is Mikaela O'Brien, and this is my sound story on the memoir.

Elizabeth Abel: So it started out as a very brief kind of historical survey of how this genre came about, starting with Augustine's confessions typically taken as the first example of somebody just writing about, in this case, himself.

Mikaela: That's the voice of Elizabeth [00:01:00] Abel, the John Hotchkis chair in English at the University of California, Berkeley, and the professor for my memoir and memory seminar.

Elizabeth Abel: We went to Rousseauau's confessions, which is a kind of response and development that turned the attention from somebody who presents himself as an, in some way, exemplary generic: I sin and I finally find redemption, and that's a generic story. Rousseauau, by contrast, as a romantic writer, emphasized his idiosyncrasies, his eccentricities, his individual experience. That is precisely of interest because it's not common.

Mikaela: We considered the memoir extensively using formalist, effective, archival, psychoanalytic, feminist, philosophical, and sociocultural approaches, delineating the genres impact over the course of the semester.

Elizabeth Abel: We went to Virginia Woolf's and how gender enters the writing of memoir.

[00:02:00] There were women memoirists before her, but she really theorizes the question of gender and writing.

One of the reasons that we did the shift in gender through Woolf is that she says explicitly she wants to be a female Rousseau and that there's so little evidence of women's writing in the memoir genre, and she wants to explore the possibilities of writing a memoir as a woman.

Well, finding a shape, you know, a life doesn't have a shape. It's a bunch of things that happen in a sort of often seemingly random or confusing sequence. But to make it endure, to make it have meaning, one needs to find a form for one's specific life. That's sort of the challenge of the genre that from Augustine on is, is sort of, upfront.

How does one [00:03:00] find a narrative form for this?

Mikaela: I decided to reach out to a woman whose memoir embodies the qualities fueling my fascination.

Roxane Gay: I started writing when I was probably five years old. I would draw villages on a napkin and then write little stories about the people I imagined living in those villages.

And I loved reading as well, so the idea of being able to tell stories was always intriguing to me.

Mikaela: Roxanne Gay is an incredibly insightful writer, editor, essayist, critic, and woman. Her bestsellers, "Bad Feminist" and "Difficult Women," offer central cultural criticism on race, gender, and sexuality. Most recently, she edited the Portable Feminist Reader with Penguin Classics in which she compiled crucial feminist literature and scholarship.

Roxane Gay: It's a collection of feminist thought across five, six hundred years, and I was able to select the pieces that are included. I've been really happy with the book. Really excited to have it out in the world, and to have people seeing the breadth of what feminism has contributed to our culture, [00:04:00] what feminist practice can look like, and how it can be written about.

Mikaela: Her memoir "Hunger" is a New York Times bestseller and was a finalist for the National Book Critic Circle Award, recognizing its excellence in literary criticism and writing.

Roxane Gay: The book is about the sexual assault I experienced when I was 12 years old and the ways in which I coped in the aftermath, which included gaining a significant amount of weight 'cause I wanted to feel safe. I wanted to make sure that I would never be harmed again, which of course is a fantasy. And so as I was thinking about writing a memoir, I wanted to make sure that I had a guiding principle, and so I decided to make it a memoir of my body. I have been very surprised by how people continue to engage with the book, how people in all kinds of bodies find things that resonate for them and feel seen, and that was very much unexpected, but has been really a great thing to behold.

Elizabeth Abel: It makes sense to me, a [00:05:00] kind of intuitive sense that it's a genre that would be very accessible to women in the 20th and 21st century as women have come to explore our personal lives, our inner lives, which was not deemed worthy of attention prior to feminism.

So now that we have permission to take those experiences seriously and reflect on them and think about what they mean and how widely shared they may be or may not be, that's I think, a decisive transformation, and I don't know what will happen going forward. Whether there's a risk that the genre will be seen as feminized and therefore less respected.

I think memoirs always occupies a somewhat precarious position between sort of high literary forms and, [00:06:00] you know, ordinary letters and journal keeping and conversation. So that's a risk, and I hope, and I think that the memoirs by women that are being published these days are strong enough, are well enough crafted, well enough written to continue to merit serious attention. But there's always a risk that they'll be dismissed.

Roxane Gay: I think our stories have always been told, and they've always been part of the public sphere, but never enough, and so what we're seeing is the world is changing. The world is acknowledging that we have humanity in common, and I do think that we generally have more in common than not, but we are different.

Difference matters. Difference should be celebrated and acknowledged, first and foremost. And [00:07:00] we have to create space in our cultural discourse for stories from people from all walks of life, and the change is coming slowly and

clearly we're experiencing a significant backlash right now, but these stories do matter and, you know, change is incremental, but it is absolutely happening.

Mikaela: The reception and creation of memoirs like Gay's inspire hope for a future in which women's stories, feelings, bodies, and minds are appreciated and respected.

As my understanding of the memoir genre has deepened, I've developed an awareness of its power and potential. I feel a profound sense of gratitude for the writers creative, sensitive, and courageous enough to undertake it, to give their life a form and to share it with the rest of us.

I am grateful to Benjamin Naddaff-Hafrey for his help on this project, to Roxane Gay for indulging my inquiry, and to Elizabeth Abel for conversations I will eternally hold dear.