Writing the Stories of My Life: Remembering Through Music

Music is the art which is most nigh to tears and memories. (Oscar Wilde)
In memory, everything seems to happen to music. (Tennessee Williams)

We all have a story to tell. However, knowing where to begin can become so overwhelming that we put off writing the story at all. This is an invitation to re-collect, record and share the stories from your life through the lens of “music”. What are the stories behind your favourite bands – where did you listen to music, what festivals, concerts, operas did you go to and what were the best and what were the worst and how have they played a role in your life? Did you sing or play a musical instrument? How did music play a role in your family when you were a child? What music did your parents and grandparents enjoy? What music completely transforms your mood? What was the first song you slow-danced to? What music do you associate with love and those you love? What music do you associate with loss? Please bring your own writing instruments to a safe environment where you will experiment with writing strategies using prompts, share your writing with others, and begin your collection of life-stories.

Notes to Review Before Each Class

- This is a memoir based writing class in which we write through the lens of fashion (clothes, accessories) to find and isolate, remember and recollect and finally write the stories that best show who we were, why we did what we did, who we are and who we are becoming
- Unlike autobiography and biography that are linear in shape, memoir can take the shape of any written form including personal essay, poetry, vignettes
- Regardless, memoir, auto and bio all fall under the umbrella of “narrative inquiry” – research that honors life stories as a way of better understanding why we do what we do
- Rules of the Course: Keep everything and honor your writing/stories, everything gets a title, don’t overthink anything, make the course work for you
- As much as you can develop a ritual of the course – while we meet once a week, our class is the “gravy” your daily writing is the meat and potatoes (or lentils and potatoes) of the course
- What I can do for you: provide structure and design – ways of thinking about HOW you might go about collecting your stories using writing strategies such as brainstorming to generate ideas, freewriting as a way of generating stories, sharing as a way of moving from writing for ourselves to writing for others
- Writing for Ourselves/Writing for Others – personal, poetic/transactional
- While we are writing for ourselves as soon as we share we tiptoe from one category to the next
- Sometimes our unique stories shed light on a shared experience

Writing:

- While this is not a writing course we all want to be more engaging, imaginative and clever writers so to improve: READ LIKE A WRITER, WRITE OFTEN AND WITH ABANDON, PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR VERBS, PUT IT OUT THERE
- As much as you can, create a daily writing ritual. You have been provided with at least 5 prompts per week – try and write for 15-20 minutes on each of the prompts.
- Choose one piece of writing that you will share with the class. The piece should be about 600 words in length. If you have written a longer piece, simply choose a section to share.
- I will listen and give feedback and encourage you to be active listeners of writing (not story) ie what do writers DO, how do they SHOW instead of TELL, not what they say
- Go for the small, the unique, what is truly yours and thus authentic
- Keep the photographs

Sharing:

- Let the writing speak for itself
- NO preamble, NO commentary

MAKE THE COURSE WORK FOR YOU

Week 1: Childhood

1. What music do you associate with childhood? What songs? What musical pieces? Quickly brainstorm a list and choose one. Write the story of this piece – the role it played in your life at the time and perhaps continues to play now.
2. Who do you associate music with from your childhood? Brainstorm a list of the people who sang to you, played for you, took you to concerts, taught you. Is the space important to these stories – the concert halls, churches, temples, school auditoriums, gyms, parks, arenas, barns, car rides…Choose one and tell the story?
3. What music do you remember from your childhood that made you happy, made you dance? Brainstorm a list, choose one and tell the story.
4. What music do you remember from your childhood that made you sad, made you reflective? Brainstorm a list, choose one and tell the story.
5. What is the playlist of your childhood? Choose 1-10 titles and weave together the story.

Week 2: The terrible, terrifying, tantalizing, torturous, terrific teens


1. What were your top 5-10-15-20+ bands? Make list and beside each one jot a few notes that answer who? Where? Why? When? How? – Choose one and write the story?
2. Maybe it wasn’t bands. What were your top 10 musical favourite musical experiences from your teens?
3. Who do you associate music with from your teens? Make a list, choose one and tell the story.
4. What were the saddest songs from your teens? The happiest? The craziest? Make lists, jot notes that are important, choose one and tell the story.
5. Tell a story about love, being a teen and weave in music as if it is was a character or setting.

**Week 3: Music and the People in My life**

https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_gupta/transcript#t-469537

Music is Medicine
Sanity

1. What music do you associate with your Mother? Your father? Make a list, choose one and tell the story.
2. What music do you associate with your immediate family and where and when and how did you listen to it? Make a list choose one and tell the story?
3. Make a list of your closest friends and beside each assign a piece of music. Choose one and tell the story.
4. What concerts and festivals did you attend? Make a list, choose one and tell the story.
5. Who would you like to be a back-up singer or player for? Has this happened? Tell this story.

**Week 4: Me, myself and I – Now and Moving Forward**

*He loved chiming clocks. He had a number of them, and liked to imagine a household in which all the clocks chimed together. Then, on the hour, there would be a golden blend of sound, a domestic, interior version of what it must have been like in old Russian towns and cities when all the church bells rang together. Assuming they ever did. Perhaps, this being Russia, half rang tardily, half in advance.* From *The Noise of Time* by Julian Barnes.


https://thewalrus.ca/minor-keys/ Minor Keys by Moira Farr

1. Who am I with music? Who am I without music?
2. What about sounds? What is the music that I listen to? Brainstorm a list of sounds that you hear in your home, your work, when you are out walking, on holiday the sounds you remember that soothed you, created panic, made you laugh, made you cry. Choose one a day and tell the story.

**Week Five: The Playlist of My Life**
This is the week you listen and write. Everyday choose a piece that you have written about, that you haven’t written about, that you haven’t thought about until now. Sit down and listen to it – if you don’t actually own it, you can find it, I am sure, on YouTube. As you listen pay attention to what you feel, to the memories and thoughts that come to you. Once the piece is over, write.

Week 6 : Performance

1. Choose one piece of writing that you would like to work on, revise, polish, present and submit to an online journal and/or give to a family member. Follow these directions at the end of the course outline. Please provide one copy for each participant. Double space and number your pages.

2. Collect all your writing and organize it in a way that makes sense. Write an introduction and conclusion. Give your collection a title.

3. Create a list called “Pieces not yet written” and include this piece in your collection.

This week we share our polished pieces and receive written feedback. We also present our working portfolios – a collection of our writing to date.

Suggestions for Editing

1. Read through your draft once. Now, read it OUT LOUD. The best way to catch grammatical errors, inconsistencies, awkward wording is by reading your work out loud.

2. Have somebody else read your piece.

3. Have you provided some kind of “hook” in your introduction? Does something happen or do you prepare the reader for something?

4. Does one paragraph logically connect to the next?

5. In your closing, have you tried to bring your piece full circle? Perhaps there is something else you have done to “complete” your piece without leaving the reader hanging in an awkward way.

Specifically:

Go through your paper and underline all your verbs twice.

1. Have you used the most powerful/effective verb?

   Eg: Instead of she ran furiously through the door

   She charged through the door

   She whispered instead of she spoke quietly
2. Are actions and reactions in chronological order?
She drank her coffee after she poured in a shot of Kahlua
She poured in a shot of Kahlua and drank her coffee

3. Are you overusing “seem”?
She seemed happy when she opened her gift.
She wrapped her arms around her father and squeezed him after she opened her gift.
The boat seemed to be sinking.
The boat was sinking.

4. Are you over-using passive verbs? Name who did what.
Not: The bananas were left on the counter.
But: Jonathon left the bananas on the counter.

5. Crying, Sobbing, Tears and Other Cliches
Where you can, have you showed the action instead of relying on clichés?
She held onto his knees sobbing “please help me!”
She sank down, clutched his knees and whispered, “please help me”.

6. Decided to…Have characters do things rather than decide to do things
Not: She decided to go for a swim before sunset
But: She went for a swim before sunset

7. Dialogue
Edit dialogue to the barest of essentials and avoid the overuse of names (remember, this is not being read out, it is being read internally)
Indent dialogue

8. IT
Be careful and name things when you can

9. THINGS – Replace “thing” with a specific word.
10. Check for inconsistencies.

What follows are the loyal friends of all writers.
Goldberg, Natalie. Old friend from far away
Goldberg, Natalie. Writing down the bones
Goldberg, Natalie. Wildmind
Heffron, Jack. The Writer’s Idea Book
Johnston, Anthony (ed). Naming the World (and other exercises for the creative writer)
King, Stephen. On Writing
Lamott, Anne. Bird by bird
Roach Smith, Marion. The Memoir Project
Roorbach, Bill. Writing Life Stories
Truss, Lynne. Easts, Shoots & Leaves (the zero tolerance approach to punctuation)
Ueland, Brenda. If you want to write
Zinsser, William. Writing about your life
Zinsser, William. On Writing Well

A Quick Brainstorm of some of my favourite memoirs

Ashton-Warner, Sylvia. Teacher

“And the design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war”. (p.88)

Beah, Ishmael. A long way gone.

Where I was a child, my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen to it. She said, "In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion." That night I wanted the sky to talk to me. (p.16)

Crozier, Ruth. Small Beneath the Sky

“Who but my mother held those small pieces of my childhood? Where would they go when she was gone?”

Ephron, Nora. I Feel Bad About my Neck

“Here are some questions I am constantly noodling over: Do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live every day as if it's your last, or do you save your money on the chance you'll live twenty more years? Is life too short, or is it going to be too long? Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses? And where do carbohydrates fit into all this? Are we really
all going to spend our last years avoiding bread, especially now that bread in American is so unbelievable delicious? And what about chocolate?”

Gallman, Kuki. I Dreamed of Africa

The friends took the ropes, and slowly, inch by inch, lowered the coffin with my baby inside into the deep brown earth, where it landed with a soft and final thud. A murmer ran through the crowd, a baby cried. The music grew splendid and exalting, absorbing sounds of weeping, sounds of birds, leaving only the mute rising tide of anguish. (p.217)

Gibb, Camilla. This is Happy

“We come to know ourselves through stories. We listen to the stories of others, we inherit the stories of those who came before, and we make sense of our own experiences by constructing a narrative that holds them, and holds us, together. Stories are how we make sense of our lives.” (p. XI)

Hemingway, Ernest. A Moveable Feast

“When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest. The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.”

Huggan, Isabel. Belonging

“But I did not want to be good. I wanted to be a writer.”

Johnson, Plum. They Left Us Everything

“Mum loved to name her houses.”

McCourt, Frank. Angela’s Ashes

“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.”

Patchett, Ann Truth and Beauty

I was starting to wonder if I was ready to be a writer, not someone who won prizes, got published and was given the time and space to work, but someone who wrote as a course of life. Maybe writing wouldn't have any rewards. Maybe the salvation I would gain through work would only be emotional and intellectual. Wouldn't that be enough, to be a waitress who found an hour or two hidden in every day to write?”

Reich, Ruth. Tender at the Bone

“She was a great cook, but she cooked more for herself than for other people, not because she was hungry but because she was comforted by the rituals of the kitchen.”
Sedaris, David. Let’s explore diabetes with owls

Wiesel, Elie. Night

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.”

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

Zinsser, William (editor) Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir

“I was looking for a way to narrate a life story of a woman that would pay due respect to her attachments to men and to family but would be about something else entirely. I wanted to convey my sense of my education, of my liberation through access to education, and of the variety of steps by which I arrived at taking charge of my own life. Philosophically, you only have to perform one free act to be a free person”. Jill Ker Conway on her memoir The Road from Coorain

“There’s enough misery. What readers want is experience. There’s nothing new in my book. It’s an old fashioned book – all the old elements are there....Well, if we didn’t have a sense of humour in those days we were dead”. Frank McCourt on his memoir Angela’s Ashes

“I recommend that to memoir writers: Make a nice dinner for everybody – something that makes you feel you’ve done good for someone. Fortunately, most people do want to be written about. They want their lives to be known and remembered. They may be wary when you describe your project to them, especially if you look like some kind of loose cannon. But once it’s done they’re usually happy.” Ian Frazier Looking for My Family

PARTICIPANT PUBLICATIONS

Glebe Report

White Oak Surprise by Kit Flynn in the Glebe Report
https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr_june_2017_web


The Globe and Mail
The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail

The Door I Can’t Open by Kit Flynn in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail


Setting the Holiday Table by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, First Person


STORY-QUILT.COM ON LINE JOURNAL

Brandied Cherries by Barbara Robertson http://www.story-quilt.com/brandied-cherries/

Moving On by Erica Sher http://www.story-quilt.com/moving-on/


Tommy by Margaret Pimm http://www.story-quilt.com/tommy-3/


Christmas on the Island by Pamela Parkin http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-on-the-island/

The Saphire Ring by Edie Fauquier http://www.story-quilt.com/the-sapphire-ring/
Fervour Young by David McCabe http://www.story-quilt.com/fervour-young/