

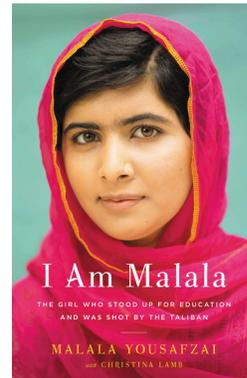
To expand the reach of Malala’s memoir—*I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*—and spread Malala’s message to young people and activists, the Global Women’s Institute (GWI) of the George Washington University (GW), in collaboration with the Malala Fund, developed a resource guide for high school and college students around the world. Building on the content of Malala’s memoir, the resource guide supports global efforts to mobilize women and men to address women’s and girls’ rights to an education.

Malala’s memoir opens the door to some of the greatest challenges of our modern world. It is about politics, education, culture, religion and violence against women and girls. It is a moment in the life of a young girl and in the history of a country. To do these broad themes justice, faculty from a wide range of disciplines contributed to the development of the resource guide.

The resource guide challenges students to think deeply, share their experiences, and engage with their communities. Each theme begins with learning objectives and a narrative, intended to start the conversation and help plan lessons. The theme then includes individual exercises, group activities, and resources to assist students and instructors in deepening their knowledge of a topic.

THE EIGHT THEMES ARE:

- 1. Memoir as Literature and History**
- 2. Education: A Human Right for Girls**
- 3. Cultural Politics, Gender and History in Malala Yousafzai’s *I am Malala***
- 4. Religion and Religious Extremism**
- 5. Malala and Violence against Women and Girls**
- 6. Malala Leadership Essay**
- 7. Malala and the Media**
- 8. Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls**



**A Memoir by the Youngest
Recipient of the Nobel
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book, visit malala.gwu.edu.



MEMOIR AS LITERATURE AND HISTORY

BY JULIE DONOVAN

PART 1



Narrative

In choosing to narrate the brutal attempt on her life, Malala Yousafzai selected the literary form known as memoir, a well-established genre used by historical figures and other thoughtful but less recognized men and women to capture a certain moment in time. This theme will consider the particular characteristics of memoir as a literary device and its effectiveness in communicating Malala's story through a discussion of the following topics:

- The unique attributes of memoir as a literary genre
- The difference between autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries
- Memoir as a powerful witness to history
- The relationship between memoir and memory

Malala Yousafzai's stirring memoir, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, combines the personal story of a girl's life caught in the vortex of war and religious extremism. As an increasingly popular genre of literary nonfiction, Malala's memoir prompts the question: What is it about the memoir that can make it a more powerful means of expression than other literary forms? In *Testament of Youth* (1933) Vera Brittain provides one answer. Grappling with how to depict World War I from a young woman's perspective, Brittain rejected the idea of writing a novel, feeling that it would be too far removed from the reality of her experience. Opting to write a memoir enabled Brittain to recount her personal story against the backdrop of a harrowing war, within a society that decried female independence and denied her the right to vote. Here is how she explained her choice: "In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavor to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of world-wide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women." (12)

A memoir can excel in evoking immediacy and veracity, where private feelings mesh with public issues and raw emotions intertwine with the detachment of rational argument and the exegesis of an intellectual or political stance. Memoir differs from autobiography in that the memoir concerns a specific, concentrated period within a life, whereas an autobiography tends to recount the story of a life that is generally more all-embracing, with a greater chronological sweep and more linear structure. There are also points of contiguity between the diary and the memoir, but the temporal immediacy of the diary typically does not allow the degree of reflection found in the memoir. All three forms of relating personal stories are told in the first person, and therefore readers need to be mindful of the process of interpreting a narrator's point of view. When we read a memoir, we may be less conscious of its aesthetic effect than we are when we read a poem or a novel. Yet there is an art to the memoir that exercises rhetorical skill just as much as other literary forms in terms of pace, tone, and choices in language.

Elie Wiesel's Holocaust memoir *Night* (1955), and Ishmael Beah's account of war in Sierra Leone, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) demonstrate how the memoir stands as a powerful witness to history. Both of these works convey the visceral effect of personal experience that gives history a more human context than a bald recounting of dates, battles, and other details of more formal or grand historical narratives. They also demonstrate the occasionally didactic nature of the memoir, which raises consciousness about society, culture, and government. Since memory is intrinsic to this genre, we should consider the complicated relationship between history and memory, and why some events emerge as more notable than others. Indeed, the memoir prompts us to consider how memory and history have an unsettled relationship that is open to examination.

While the memoir serves as a testament to injustice, it is also a genre that may indulge the worst excesses of contemporary voyeurism and self-absorption, so it is worth considering when memoirs reveal merely narcissism and even deceit. Though readers concede the subtleties of framing a story, there remains an expectation that a memoir must, at its core, be genuine. When it was discovered that parts of James Frey's confessional memoir of drug addiction, *A Million Little Pieces* (2005), were intentionally fabricated, many readers felt betrayed. While fiction has its share of unreliable first-person narrators, what is demanded of the memoir is reliable narration, since the memoir is inherently linked to a sense of authenticity and good faith.

Despite Malala's courage, maturity, and poise, her experiences happened when she was a child. Malala's narrative is typical of the memoir's ability to give us an insider's perspective on events that may seem remote when reported in newscasts and other media. The vividness of personal experience evokes not only the sense of terror and displacement caused by Taliban control but also the beauty of the Swat Valley and the renowned hospitality of the Pashtun people. It also serves to educate us about an area too often conceptualized in the abstract. As Malala explains, she thinks of herself as primarily Swati, then Pashtun, and then Pakistani, demonstrating complicated allegiances in regional and national identity. Malala's authorial voice is alternately strident and playful, but we may consider the challenges involved in successfully sustaining that voice.

Malala's memoir illustrates the power of contrasts—from descriptions of bombardment and her assailant's shaking hand as he shoots her at close range—to teenage preoccupations with *Twilight* books and arguments with Munneba, her loving but possessive best friend. Although she campaigns against the encroaching fundamentalism seeking to destroy girls' access to education, Malala's criticism of the Taliban is combined with an exposition of other factors that have destabilized her former home: the repercussions of British colonialism, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, support of the West for Afghan mujahideen and military dictators in Pakistan, and U.S.-ordered drone strikes. Malala provides the kind of details that only an

eye-witness familiar with her surroundings can give: how a charismatic Taliban leader sets himself up as a modern-day Robin Hood through his FM radio station, or how some people prefer sharia law because it is considered more effective than the corrupt legal system in place. Piquant details that Malala provides, such as the Pakistani establishment's production of a popular soap opera of its travails called *Beyond the Call of Duty*, are described with the impish humor that shines through Malala's prose, despite the horrors she experienced. Perhaps it is this capacity to find laughter amid tears that tempers her indictment of inequality and cruelty.

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P A R T 2



Resources

Teachers are encouraged to view the PowerPoint presentation prepared by Professor Julie Donovan.
<https://malala.gwu.edu/sites/malala.gwu.edu/files/Memoir PPT revised.pdf>

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

1. Writing memoir: Just as the assassination attempt on Malala profoundly altered the course of her life, students will write a brief memoir that focuses on one memorable instance where everything seemed to change. The event can be personal and directly related to their family, such as birth, death, marriage and remarriage; on the other hand, it can be something of global significance. For many, living through the attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2011, or the inauguration of the United States' first African-American president in 2008, profoundly marked them. In organizing your own memoir, reflect on how Malala organized her narrative by providing the description of a key event, historic and cultural context, and her own response.
2. Contrasts and complexities in memoir: Explore the contrasts and complexities revealed by a memoir of your own choosing. How do the contrasts and complexities relate to individual experience as it is affected by social, cultural, and historical events? Do you find that you also have "contrasts" within yourself as they relate to things in your life that you feel passionate about or want to change? What can we learn from looking at the world and ourselves in a more complex way?
3. The introduction to memoir states that the memoir evokes "immediacy and veracity, where private feelings mesh with public issues, and raw emotions intertwine with the detachment of rational argument.. Write an essay where you argue for the benefits and downfalls of approaching a historical or personal account in this manner. To what extent it is bad or good to have the personal be mixed with the "facts"? Can you think of a time in your life when the personal and public became intertwined and how that affected your thinking or recounting of a situation?
4. Select a historical, social, political, or cultural event and create a blog about it. Consider what it is like to write a running history based on your own experience.
5. Analyze the following Malala blogs in the light of what you understand about memoir:
<http://malalayousafzaibbcblog.blogspot.com>
<http://www.malala-yousafzai.com>
<http://ziauddinoyousafzai.blogspot.ca>

GROUP ACTIVITIES

1. Identify a historic event chronicled by journalists, historians, and individuals that has also been addressed in the form of a memoir, diary, or autobiography. Divide the class into groups, and ask each to read different accounts of a same event. For example, one group can read historical accounts of the Jews in Holland during World War II whereas another will read selections from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Another pair might read historical accounts of apartheid South Africa while others will read *Kaffir Boy*. How do they each portray the times? The emotional context? Historical facts? Where do we feel the greater affinity?

While there are hundreds of wonderful memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies written in response to major historical events, we offer these as possible suggestions:

- *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Anne Frank) and/or *Night and the Holocaust* (Elie Wiesel)
- *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* (Mark Mathabane)
- *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Ishmael Beh) and the war in Sierra Leone
- *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Azar Nafisi) and the Iranian Revolution

2. A comparison of *Malala* and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Both of these books deal with the plight of schoolgirls living under a fundamentalist regime. Students may read an extract of *Persepolis* or watch the film in class. Students will then divide into smaller groups and identify similarities and differences between *Malala* and *Persepolis*. This activity can show students how Muslim women hail from different histories, backgrounds, and cultures.
3. Students will be organized into groups to work on the task of interviewing a person who has lived through a life event such as the Civil Rights Act, the Apollo moon landing, or Vietnam War. Develop a memoir based on your interview and conversations, considering how the sharing of narratives sheds light on different perspectives of a historical event.



Supplemental Material for High School Memoir as Literature and History

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How can memoirs shape our understanding of critical moments in history?
2. What can Malala's memoir teach us about history and world events?

CONTEXT

How is a memoir different from a diary or an autobiography?

A memoir is a personal account of an event, a season or a memory that is generally very personal, evocative and focused. It is frequently written after the events being described and offers a degree of reflection and analysis of the circumstances. A diary recounts the daily events of a person's life and, similar to a memoir, may focus on one particular season of life. A diary is a very immediate account, because it is usually written as events unfold, offers a vivid summary of actions and people. An autobiography tends to focus on a chronological account of a person's life and tends to be more linear and inclusive.

Are memoirs always true?

Even though an author might adopt a non-linear and perhaps even more literary approach to her narrative, there is an expectation that, at the core, the events that define the story will be true. The unique value of a memoir is that real-life events (battles, conflicts, family milestones, natural

disasters, political victories and defeats, illness, and many more) are represented through a uniquely personal lens. When notable memoirs have been revealed as embellished or not 100% accurate, readers have generally felt a sense of disappointment and even betrayal.

Are memoirs always grounded in significant historic events?

Memoirs start with a historic event: something happened to the writer. They become interesting for a variety of other reasons. One is that they allow the reader to understand history from a uniquely personal perspective. A writer may become famous after writing a memoir because of the success of the book. Memoirs are also interesting because they open up lives of famous people. Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* is a reflection on the challenges of being an adolescent girl trying to find her place in a world still hostile to independent women. The book's popularity came initially from the popularity of the author.

How do memories shape memoirs?

Memory is extremely subjective; that is to say, memories are often shaped by how a person feels about an event, a person, or an experience. An author might write about a painful experience and, while the facts are accurate, the descriptions offer a perspective on how she felt about a specific situation. A memoir can tell us not only about the circumstances of a person's life, but also about their emotional involvement with people and events by what they chose to write about and how they chose to remember.

KEY TERMS OR NAMES

Memoir: A written account in which the author recounts his or her story. A memoir reflects the writer's point of view and can focus on one theme, one period or one event.

Autobiography: A first-person narrative of someone's life. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a very famous example of this type of Literature.

Biography: The story of a person's life, written by someone other than the subject of the book. An example of a recent best-selling biography is *Steve Jobs*, by Walter Isaacson.

Literary non-fiction (also referred to as creative non-fiction): A popular genre of literature where the author uses techniques traditionally found in works of fiction to tell a story. These include well-developed characters and a compelling story line. Notable examples of this genre include *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, *Nickel and Dimed in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich and *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen.

Novel: A novel is a story that comes entirely from the imagination of the writer. While some novels are based on well-known historic events (for example, Leon Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), the events are described through a fictional lens.

Vera Brittain: Vera Brittain was a British writer, feminist and pacifist. She is best known for her 1933 memoir *Testament of Youth*, in which she describes her experiences during World War I and her journey towards pacifism.

Elie Wiesel: A Romanian born Jewish-American author, professor and human rights activist. He first became known for his memoir, *Night*, based on his experiences as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps in World War II. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

Ishmael Beah: An author and human rights activist from Sierra Leone whose Memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, recounts his experiences fighting as a child soldier.

James Frey: An American writer, author of the memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, initially greeted with great favor until the author was discovered to have made much of it up.

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For more information or to submit feedback about the resource guide, visit malala.gwu.edu.