The Fallibility of Memory: Truth and Fact in Modern Memoir

“Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth, but not its twin.”

--Barbara Kingsolver

The nature of memory is elusive and slippery. Our most conscious understanding of our own past is often filtered through what has happened since, and whenever we seek to reproduce or render past events, we end up (re)constructing them. When it comes to writing about childhood, especially, where many of our memories are derived from stories we’ve been told, how can memory be anything other than fallible? How, then, can anyone claim to write a “true” life story?

This class will examine eight contemporary memoirs through the lens of memory, specifically its limitations and relativity. Within a greater contextual analysis of our cultural fascination with “reality,” we will investigate the distinctions between literal and emotional truth with an eye toward how each author navigates the tricky terrain of the past on his or her way to the nonfiction bookshelves.

Reading

Bartók, Mira. The Memory Palace.
Coates, Ta-Nehisi. The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood.
Doty, Mark. Heaven’s Coast.
Karr, Mary. The Liars’ Club.
Slater, Lauren. Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir.
Strayed, Cheryl. Wild.
Wolff, Tobias. This Boy’s Life.

Assignments

• Three 6-8 page essays critically engaging with two of the assigned texts per essay (60% of final grade)
• Final essay exam (30% of final grade)
• Attendance and participation (10% of final grade)