

An Unguier Mind

Rutgers Newark Community Writing Workshop
PaulA Neves, Instructor, The Writing Program
pneves@rutgers.edu

Thursday, June 8, 2023
Hahne Building #250
4-6pm

vs. autobiography

Theme: Memoir Writing: Exploring the ME in Memoir

Is there a story from or about your life you've been dying to tell? While your story is about you, it likely also reveals something more universal. In this workshop, we will discuss what memoir writing is and how your "slice of life" story can be used to create connection, understanding, and a way forward for both you and your readers.

Texts for Discussion (subject to changes):

- Excerpt from *Put on Your Crown: Life-Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom* by Queen Latifah
- Excerpt from "Crying in the H Mart" by Michelle Zauner
- "Immigrants, Memories and Trash" by Andrew Lam
- Chapter excerpt from *John Barleycorn* by Jack London
- Chapter excerpt from *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

Memoir - time or incident

Schedule (subject to adjustments):

1. Discuss: What is memoir? From slice of life, to cautionary tale, to reflection and advice: The different forms memoir can take and finding/keeping the ME in memoir (15-20 minutes)
2. Read and discuss texts as time permits (15-20 minutes)
3. Write Time 1: give prompt and write (20-30 minutes)
4. 5 minute break
5. Share writings and discuss what's strong/working (20 minutes)
6. Discuss revision strategies (15 minutes)
7. Write/Revision Time 2: (15 minutes; work with individual students as needed)
8. Hand out flyers for upcoming Community Workshops

paulA neves is a Newark, NJ-born poet/writer, multimedia artist, and educator. The recipient of the 2020 NJ Poets Prize from the Journal of NJ Poets, and various other awards, paulA is the author of the poetry chapbook, *capricornucopia: the dream of the goats* (Finishing Line Press 2018), the co-author of the poetry/photography collection, *Shirts & Skins* (Shine Portrait Studio Press 2017) and the co-founder of Parkway North Productions, which produced the award-

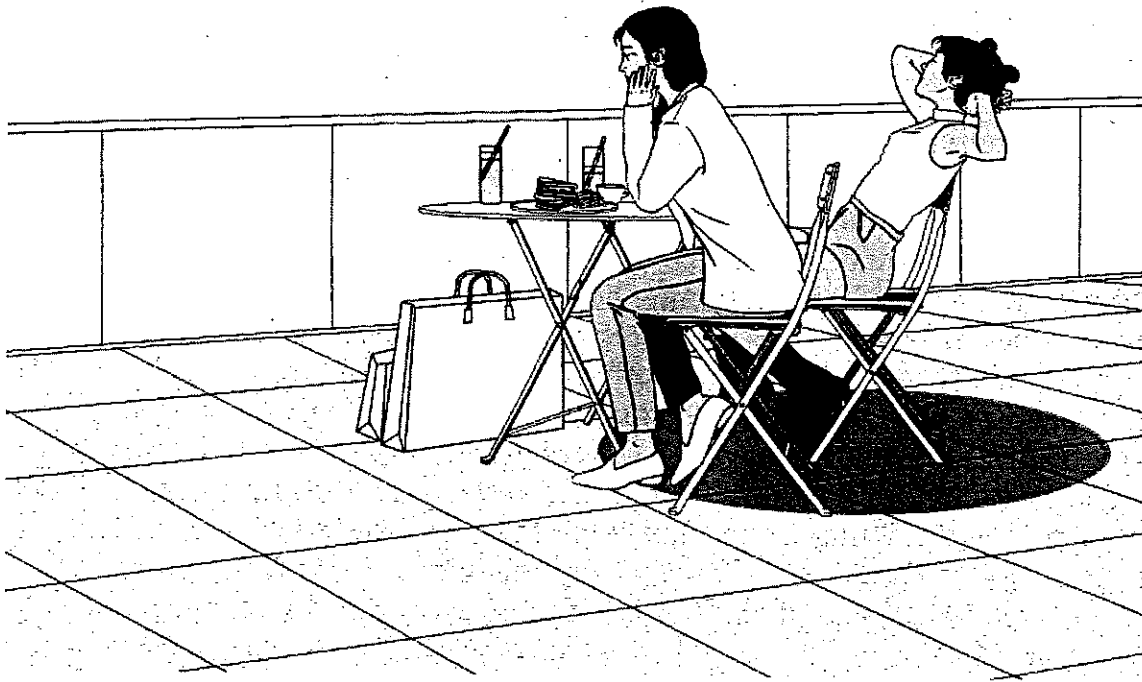
winning documentary *The Remedy*, about two NJ hip hop artists. paulA's other writing and visual art, which often focus on the immigrant experience, the confluence of urban and natural environments, family and artists communities, have appeared in various publications and exhibits. She teaches at Rutgers and in other community and college programs.

Mother's death

BOOK EXCERPT APR. 19, 2021
What My Mother Ate

I remember her taste clearly because that was how my mother loved you, in subtle observations of what brought joy.

By Michelle Zauner



My mother died on October 18, 2014, a date I'm always forgetting. I don't know why exactly, if it's because I don't want to remember or if the actual date seems so unimportant in the grand scheme of what we endured. She was fifty-six years old. I was twenty-five, an age my mother had assured me for years would be special. It was the same age my mother had been when she met my father. The year they got married, the year she left her home country, her mother, and two sisters and embarked on a pivotal chapter of her adult life. The year she began the family that would come to define her. For me, it was the year things were supposed to fall into place. It was the year her life ended and mine fell apart.

Sometimes I feel guilty about misremembering when it happened. Every fall I have to scroll through the photos I've taken of her gravestone to reconfirm the date engraved, half obscured by the multicolored bouquets I've left these past years, or I resort to googling the obituary I neglected to write so I can prepare to

willfully feel something that never quite feels like the thing I'm supposed to be feeling.

My father is obsessed with dates. Some sort of internal clock whirs without fail around every impending birthday, death day, anniversary, and holiday. His psyche intuitively darkens the week before and soon enough he'll inundate me with Facebook messages about how unfair it all is and how I'll never know what it's like to lose your best friend. Then he'll go back to riding his motorcycle around Phuket, where he retired a year after she died, filling the void with warm beaches and street-vended seafood and young girls who can't spell the word *problem*.

What I never seem to forget is what my mother ate. She was a woman of many "usuals." Half a patty melt on rye with a side of steak fries to share at the Terrace Cafe after a day of shopping. An unsweetened iced tea with half a packet of Splenda, which she would insist she'd never use on anything else. Minestrone she'd order "steamy hot," not "steaming hot," with extra broth from the Olive Garden. On special occasions, half a dozen oysters on the half shell with champagne mignonette and "steamy hot" French onion soup from Jake's in Portland. She was maybe the only person in the world who'd request "steamy hot" fries from a McDonald's drive-through in earnest. Jjamppong, spicy seafood noodle soup with extra vegetables from Cafe Seoul, which she always called Seoul Cafe, transposing the syntax of her native tongue. She loved roasted chestnuts in the winter though they gave her horrible gas. She liked salted peanuts with light beer. She drank two glasses of chardonnay almost every day but would get sick if she had a third. She ate spicy pickled peppers with pizza. At Mexican restaurants she ordered finely chopped jalapeños on the side. She ordered dressings on the side. She hated cilantro, avocados, and bell peppers. She was allergic to celery. She rarely ate sweets, with the exception of the occasional pint of strawberry Häagen-Dazs, a bag of tangerine jelly beans, one or two See's chocolate truffles around Christmastime, and a blueberry cheesecake on her birthday. She rarely snacked or took breakfast. She had a salty hand.

I remember these things clearly because that was how my mother loved you, not through white lies and constant verbal affirmation, but in subtle observations of what brought you joy, pocketed away to make you feel comforted and cared for without even realizing it. She remembered if you liked your stews with extra broth, if you were sensitive to spice, if you hated tomatoes, if you didn't eat seafood, if you had a large appetite. She remembered which banchan side dish you emptied first so the next time you were over it'd be set with a heaping double portion, served alongside the various other preferences that made you, you.

Success

Put on Your Crown

Life-Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom By Queen Latifah



CHAPTER 1

Success

You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. — Winnie-the-Pooh

Looking up at that first mountain summit, more than four thousand feet in the air, I wasn't sure I could make it. It was at least fifteen miles, and the climb was steep. I'd never done a hike like that before. But there I was, with no choice but to put one foot in front of the other, making sure I didn't lose the fire trail and go wandering off in the wrong direction, or worse, fall down the side of a cliff. It was seven a.m., I'd been up since five a.m. for a yoga class and a vegan breakfast, and my first thought when I started that trail was, "We're going over that?!"

This all started early in September 2001, when I booked myself into a hiking boot camp in Calabasas, California, because I wanted to quit smoking. I picked up the habit when I was fourteen and managed to quit a few times, but smoking has a tendency to creep back into my life, especially when I'm working or stressing. A week in a healthy environment, doing nothing but hiking and yoga, was my way of separating myself from cigarettes and going cold turkey. This retreat was just a house in the middle of the woods. There were no stores around. There were no phones, except for a pay phone on the wall in case of an emergency. We all slept under the same roof and shared meals at a communal table. It was a place where people came to get back to some healthy living, lose weight, get in touch with nature, whatever it was. I just needed to be in an environment that was free of distractions, where I could focus on something besides my crazy, hectic lifestyle.

We were expected to hike at least fifteen miles of mountain ranges a day for a week, and that first time out was intense. I was out of shape and breathing hard. But as I continued to walk, I noticed something. I was feeling lighter. My mind was clear of all thought except for the present moment. I didn't have time to think about all the problems in my life. Or anything else. I was just concentrating on my feet, trying not to trip on a tree root while observing the view, breathing in the cedar-scented air, and enjoying the sights and sounds of the woods. I was back to the primal, the essence of surviving and getting to where I was going.

Eventually, I made it to the top, and when I looked down at the valley below me and the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean in the distance, I couldn't believe how far I'd come. I felt so strong and powerful. I was so proud of what I'd accomplished. I did it!

That night at dinner, the leaders of the hiking group went around the table and asked each of us to share a thought we had from the day. Everyone had a little story to tell or an observation to make. But when they got around to me, the only thing I could think of to say was this:

"I am stronger than I thought I was."

I didn't know I had it in me. There's more to all of us than we realize. Life is so much bigger, grander, higher, and wider than we allow ourselves to think. We're capable of so much more than we allow ourselves to believe. Box some seemingly mousy person into a corner and things will come out of her that you never would have imagined. If you push someone out of her comfort zone, she might perform in a way that she never thought possible.

We've all got so much more potential in us than we are willing to explore. We're all capable of second, third, and fourth acts. We're multidimensional beings, but we have a tendency to get trapped in a mind-set. We all deserve to get to that mountaintop and several more besides. We should be climbing the whole mountain range and enjoying the walk through all its peaks and valleys. And we can, as long as we remember to get out of our own way.

At the end of another one of those hikes, the other boot camp guests and I ended up on the beach in Malibu. We were so happy to be by the sea after several days in the woods, shut off in our own little enclosed world. I started picking up rocks and throwing them in the water. Then I saw this one stone and did a double take. On it was an image of a man standing tall with one arm down by his waist and the other arm raised in the air with his hand clenched in a fist. It was a fist pump rock! I am not making this up. I believe in miracles, but trust me, I am not one of these people who see images of the Virgin Mary on a piece of toast! This was real. I showed it to the other people in the group, and they agreed—it was clearly a picture of a guy going, "Yeah, I did it!" It was like the universe was sending me confirmation of the message I'd gotten out of that week, and I was in a mental state where I was able to receive that message. In that moment, my mind was free of life's clutter and my eyes and ears were open to the signs. And guess what? Not only did I lose weight and improve my outlook, I quit smoking. Of course, it all got undone when I got back to New York City two days before September 11. From my apartment across the river in New Jersey I witnessed the attacks, and suddenly my world and everyone else's had changed. Recidivism bit me on the butt, and I went back to my bad habits for comfort. I forgot my inner strength.

Whenever that happens, I pick up that fist pump rock and contemplate its message. It sits on the mantelpiece of my house in Los Angeles, and every time I look at it, I remember what it's like to feel like Superwoman.

We all need a little keepsake like that, especially these days. I know many of you are losing jobs or struggling to find work. It's tough for someone who has just faced a layoff. Millions of us are feeling lost right now. This is a scary time for a lot of people. Their industries are dying. Men and women who worked in factories or at newspapers thought they'd have jobs forever. What they thought they'd be doing until they retire may no longer be an option. There's no such thing as job security anymore. The film and music business are no different. People don't realize that even if you make a lot of money, you can lose it just as fast. Show business isn't exactly a steady profession. One day you're hot, and the next day you're over. You never know.

About the Author

Queen Latifah was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. The Queen got her first break in music when a demo tape featuring one of her raps made its way to Tommy Boy Records. She was signed and immediately became a hit. She won the Best New Artist Award in 1990 for her album *All Hail the Queen*, which also went platinum. The second single from the album, "Ladies First," was eventually named by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as one of the 500 Songs That Shaped Rock 'n' Roll.

By the time her second album "*Nature of a Sista*" came out in 1991, Queen Latifah had begun investing in small businesses in her neighborhood, and acting both in television and movies. After the death of her brother and a soured deal with Tommy Boy, The Queen released her third album, *Black Reign*, and founded Flavor Unit Records and Management. She also landed a regular spot on *Living Single* and went on to star in a plethora of feature films including: *Set It Off*, *The Perfect Holiday*, *Taxi*, and *Bringing Down the House*.

was ever more

in experience,
felter me from
acquaintance.
" moving me
mother, ever
the grown-ups
It was a joke,
was no shame
and snickered
in gusto how
or the bridge,
is that night,
he fell in the
/us no shame
y, devilishly
monotony of

redly on my
It that I had
nd the other
The face of
y, everybody
umny. Even
ing man of
he wrestled
here was no
was purely

Jack London

CHAPTER V

THIS physical loathing for alcohol I have never got over. But I have conquered it. To this day I re-conquer it every time I take a drink. The palate never ceases to rebel, and the palate can be trusted to know what is good for the body. But men do not knowingly drink for the effect alcohol produces on the body. What they drink for is the brain-effect; and if it must come through the body, so much the worse for the body.

And yes, despite my physical loathing for alcohol, the brightest spots in my child life were the saloons. Sitting on the heavy potato wagons, wrapped in fog, feet stinging from inactivity, the horses plodding slowly along the deep road through the sandhills, one bright vision made the way never too long. The bright vision was the saloon at Colma,* where my father, or whoever drove, always got out to get a drink. And I got out to warm by the great stove and get a soda cracker. Just one soda cracker, but a fabulous luxury. Saloons were good for something. Back behind the plodding horses, I would take an hour in consuming that one cracker. I took the smallest of nibbles, never losing a crumb, and chewed the nibble till it became the thinnest and most delectable of pastes. I never voluntarily swallowed this paste. I just tasted it, and went on tasting it, turning it over with my tongue, spreading it on the inside of one cheek, then on the inside of the other cheek, until, at the end, it eluded me and in tiny drops and oozelets slipped and dribbled down my throat. Horace Fletcher had nothing on me when it came to soda crackers.*

I liked saloons. Especially I liked the San Francisco saloons. They had the most delicious dainties for the taking—strange breads and crackers, cheeses, sausages,

Always
This is
Could

sardines—wonderful foods that I never saw on our meager home-table. And once, I remember, a bartender mixed me a sweet temperance drink of syrup and soda water. My father did not pay for it. It was the bartender's treat, and he became my ideal of a good, kind man. I dreamed day dreams of him for years. Although I was seven years old at the time, I can see him now with undiminished clearness, though I never laid eyes on him but that one time. The saloon was south of Market Street in San Francisco. It stood on the west side of the street. As you entered, the bar was on the left. On the right, against the wall, was the free-lunch counter. It was a long, narrow room, and at the rear, beyond the beer kegs on tap, were small round tables and chairs. The bartender was blue-eyed, and had fair, silky hair peeping out from under a black silk skull-cap. I remember he wore a brown Cardigan jacket, and I know precisely the spot, in the midst of the array of bottles, from which he took the bottle of red-colored syrup. He and my father talked long, and I sipped my sweet drink and worshiped him. And for years afterward I worshiped the memory of him.

Despite my two disastrous experiences, here was John Barleycorn, prevalent and accessible everywhere in the community, luring and drawing me. Here were connotations of the saloon making deep indentations in a child's mind. Here was a child, forming its first judgments of the world, finding the saloon a delightful and desirable place. Stores, nor public buildings, nor all the dwellings of men ever opened their doors to me and let me warm by their fires or permitted me to eat the food of the gods from narrow shelves against the wall. Their doors were ever closed to me; the saloon's doors were ever open. And always and everywhere I found saloons, on highway and byway, up narrow alleys and on busy thoroughfares, bright-lighted and cheerful, warm in winter and in summer

dark and cool. Yes, the saloon was a mighty fine place, and it was more than that.

By the time I was ten years old, my family had abandoned ranching and gone to live in the city.* And here, at ten, I began on the streets as a newsboy. One of the reasons for this was that we needed the money.* Another reason was that I needed the exercise. I had found my way to the free public library,* and was reading myself into nervous prostration. On the poor-ranches on which I had lived there had been no books. In ways truly miraculous, I had been lent four books, marvelous books, and them I had devoured. One was the life of Garfield;* the second, Paul du Chailly's African travels;* the third, a novel by Ouida with the last forty pages missing;* and the fourth, Irving's 'Alhambra'.* This last had been lent me by a school-teacher. I was not a forward child. Unlike Oliver Twist, I was incapable of asking for more. When I returned the 'Alhambra' to the teacher I hoped she would lend me another book. And because she did not—most likely she deemed me unappreciative—I cried all the way home on the three-mile tramp from the school to the ranch. I waited and yearned for her to lend me another book. Scores of times I nerved myself almost to the point of asking her, but never quite reached the necessary pitch of effrontery.

And then came the city of Oakland, and on the shelves of that free-library I discovered all the great world beyond the skyline. Here were thousands of books as good as my four wonder-books, and some were even better. Libraries were not concerned with children in those days, and I had strange adventures. I remember, in the catalogue, being impressed by the title, 'The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle'.* I filled an application blank and the librarian handed me the collected and entirely unexpurgated works of Smollet in one huge volume. I read everything, but principally history and adventure, and all the old travels