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Memoir: An Introduction by G. Thomas Couser (review)

Nicole Stamant

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Rev. of *Memoir: An Introduction*. By G. Thomas Couser. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. 208pp.

N I C O L E S T A M A N T

From one of the preeminent thinkers in the fields of autobiography studies and disability studies, G. Thomas Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction* distills scholarship about the genre of memoir for a general readership and undergraduate students. Readers who expect new research in the field will not find it here; that said, Couser provides a comprehensive and thoughtful discussion about the genre, giving readers the kinds of explanations and theoretical foundations many might think the genre seems not to need but which, in fact, it does. In the process, Couser reminds his readers of what can be gained and, thereby, the concerns of reading memoir: the role of self-making through self-narration, the obligations memoirists have to both the historical record and the people portrayed within their narratives, and the ethics of reading—and of writing—memoir. He suggests that the stakes of understanding generic expectations are high because, he writes, especially in life writing, “genre is not about mere literary form; it’s about *force*—what a narrative’s purpose is, what impact it seeks to have on the world” (9; emphasis added). In *Memoir: An Introduction*, Couser’s claims that knowledge about the various forms memoir might take, and why memoir is the dominant term for literary life writing, compel the reader to think in more considered ways about a genre that is much maligned in contemporary parlance. In fact, Couser takes care to establish some of the reasons why a genre-based analysis is significant and useful in a moment in which categorizing works may seem to be beside the point and could have the potential to marginalize particular iterations of self-narration.

Underscoring his dedication to informing a general audience, the chapters in *Memoir* work to provide readers with scaffolding that funnels them through Couser’s analyses of the genre in a prose style that is accessible and straightforward. He begins with an introduction that explains why a book on the genre of memoir might be useful, situating his readers explicitly at the time of its writing, in 2010. Using excerpts from literary novels, Couser also demonstrates the ways in which memoir has permeated the publishing world more

largely; quoting from Laura Lippman's novel *Life Sentences* (2009), he provides a couple of scenes that perform some of the issues that he illuminates more completely in subsequent chapters. For example, to introduce the complicated subject of the ethics of writing about one's childhood friends and acquaintances, he notes that Lippman's protagonist, an author who had written several memoirs by the time the action of the novel takes place, must negotiate some of her friends who resented their portrayal in her previous memoirs. Likewise, Couser tangles with the notion that publishers and readers prefer to read memoir rather than novels through Lippman's protagonist's decision to write memoir rather than fiction. Such distinction leads into Couser's first chapter, "What Memoir Is, and What It Is Not." Here, Couser focuses his attention on distinguishing memoir from fiction, and thereby from the novel. Providing provocative examples, including the James Frey episode and the propensity for students—and other readers, by extension—consistently to refer to memoirs as novels in their discussions of the works, Couser centers on relational narratives, the way that an umbrella term like "life writing" is understood outside the academy (his experience: it's not), and the particularities of self-expression and self-representation in culture-bound societies. He continues his discussion of such idiosyncrasies in the second chapter, titled "Memoir and Genre," in which he details the proliferation of potential names that scholars have proposed to negotiate kinds of autobiographical texts and thereby performs the reasons why genre matters.

Subsequent chapters engage the various forms of memoir, contemporary memoir, the ethics of memoir, its "American Roots," and the genre's work. In each of these, Couser takes great pains to provide his readers with appropriate sources—both primary texts that perform the thing he theorizes and secondary sources that would help them investigate the particular element in more detail—which is a useful feature of such a book and will give even the most well-versed life writing scholars new primary sources to think about and investigate. In his discussion of its forms, he negotiates the interaction between memoir and the novel, reminding his readers that the foundations of the novel are in autobiographical genres and describing various modes of narration and narrative technique. For example, Couser easily moves between such well-known life writing texts as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Philip Roth's *Patrimony*, and the novels *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* in order to discuss varying modes of narration and the expectations readers have for protagonists and narrators, temporality and spatiality, and narrative closure. The

facility with which he navigates through a discussion of these texts demonstrates the larger accessibility of *Memoir: An Introduction*; it's plausible that an undergraduate or a general reader would have at least passing knowledge of some of those works. And, for such a reader, Couser's engagement with some of the most frequently examined memoirs demonstrates a few of our current preoccupations as scholars.

One of the most compelling chapters, "Memoir's Ethics," is also the hinge of much contemporary popular conversation about memoir: the ethics of memoir. Given the high profile of some of the autobiographical hoaxes in recent years, a general readership will, presumably, also find this section of use. As is the case with much in *Memoir: An Introduction*, Couser distinguishes memoir from fiction, suggesting that this is the place where generic expectations and understandings have real implications. In terms of the ethics of each mode, Couser notes that "novelists are relatively free from legal and ethical constraints," and that for the most part, they need to deal only with "plagiarism and libel" (79). For memoirists, though, he suggests that there is a "paradox at the heart of memoir: the genre demands a fidelity to truth that may overtax its source and conflict with its aspirations as art" (80). Couser reminds readers of Philippe Lejeune's critical concept of the autobiographical pact to suggest that memoirists reaffirm their position as the work's author, narrator, and protagonist; this means that an identity position is at stake in the generic understandings of a work. The same kinds of investments do not exist for works of fiction. After his thoughtful groundwork and comprehensive examination of the James Frey incident, Couser provides a similarly complete discussion of the controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú and her narrative.

Here, though, after providing a thorough discussion of the specific genre concerns—between *testimonio* and memoir, for example—and the implications of a co-authored text, Couser writes that he does not want to "adjudicate" the Menchú situation (86, 89). As the chapter continues, he weaves into his text discussions of other ethically ambiguous situations in the landscape of life writing, including the contemporary memoirs *Three Cups of Tea*, by John Mortenson, *Famous All Over Town*, by Danny James, and the literary case studies of Oliver Sacks, as well as Richard Hildreth's 1836 *The Slave, or Memoirs of a Fugitive* and the unpublished *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes* hoax. These discussions are central to the current conversation about life writing, and, in this chapter, Couser discusses them insightfully, placing them into context with one another in ways that will be helpful for his general readership. However, a reader may want something more from his analysis. Couser's *Altered Egos*:

Authority in American Autobiography (1989) deals with “counterfeit autobiography” in its preface, and Couser’s decades of analysis and expertise might provide him with the unique position to be able to make some kind of assessment about such situations; following such a discerning and forthright discussion, readers may want something more. The price of such hoaxes, for the genre and for history, is high.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the places in *Memoir: An Introduction* where the narrative pace moves along at its most brisk are those moments in which Couser discusses the things that have made him a leading scholar in autobiography studies and disability studies: when he discusses the peculiarly American tradition that gives rise to memoir, the prose sparkles. Here, he reminds his readers that much of what “served the colonial project” would now fall under the umbrella of life writing, and certain “American historical conditions generated distinctive life-writing genres, like narratives of exploration, settlement, and Indian captivity” (111). Distributed throughout the book, examples like these serve his audience well; if readers hadn’t considered the national autobiographical roots in American literature, surely they will think more deeply about them in the future. And, to think more critically about the things that memoir does—not simply to know what it is, of course, but what it does and how what it is influences what we think it does—is the “ultimate goal” of this book. If a reader wants a bit more from Couser in terms of the ethics of memoir, it is because his facility discussing the genre’s forms, its moods, its modes, and its historic (and future!) significance is so complete. Finally, adding to works like Ben Yagoda’s *Memoir: A History* and its overview of the genre, and to essays by Julie Rak and Helen M. Buss, Couser makes space for a general readership to begin to read memoir more ethically than they might otherwise do. This genre analysis about *the* genre in “the age of memoir” is necessary and timely, and it will allow new readers a way of thinking more critically about literary memoir.

Agnes Scott College