

Exploring Social Justice, Identity Politics, and Memoir-Writing at a Catholic University through Robin Ha's *All-American Girl*

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Back in 2009, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, known for her works *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Americanah* (2013), and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), delivered a TED Talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story.” In it, Adichie shares how she grew up reading books with characters who were “foreign” to her. This led her to believe that books naturally needed to feature outsiders and explore topics she couldn’t personally relate to.¹ It was not until she discovered books set in African countries that she understood the concept of “the danger of a single story,” which leads to stereotypes that are often “untrue” and “incomplete.” Ultimately, she notes: “the consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”² Adichie’s powerful speech highlights the significance of seeing yourself represented in literature. It drives home how crucial it is for us to have a sense of ourselves in the stories we read.

As an educator at a predominantly white Catholic university, ensuring that all students are acknowledged has been central to my pedagogical philosophy and syllabus design. In today’s political climate, where higher education faces challenges and programs supporting multiculturalism and marginalized communities or identities are being dismantled, I believe memoir writing as a form of narrative nonfiction, can be a powerful and transformative teaching tool. It can foster empathy, help students find their voice, and challenge stereotypes within their communities or identities. This pedagogical exercise also reinforces a Catholic university’s mission to uphold the dignity of all.

Since Fall 2016, I’ve taught a range of courses, from introductory literature classes to advanced undergraduate courses on postcolonial and world literature. My teaching goal has always been to use literary texts to help students challenge their perspectives, recognize their privilege, and see themselves reflected in literature. In his August 2024 letter, “Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation,” the late Pope Francis noted that “reading a literary text places us in a position of ‘seeing through the eyes of others,’ thus gaining a breath of perspective that broadens our humanity. We develop an imaginative empathy that enables us to identify with how others see, experience, and respond to reality. Without such empathy, there can be no solidarity, sharing, compassion, mercy.” He also discusses the decline of deep reading in the digital age, where social media and artificial intelligence often replace engagement with books. Consequently, he argues that society

no longer relates to one another as it did before the digital revolution.³ I largely agree and believe that reading and writing are, in many ways, interconnected and essential skills. In these times, it has become increasingly urgent that we read the stories of those from marginalized and underrepresented communities. Sacred Heart University's mission as a Catholic institution is to recognize the dignity of all people. Consequently, our English department offers a variety of courses that enable students to engage with literature, including world literature and postcolonial texts, which encourages them to read and reflect.

In Spring 2025, I taught my first "American Women of Color" course, which is part of the core curriculum and can be taken as an alternative to the Freshmen English course. It is also an upper-level undergraduate English course. The course was over-enrolled, to my surprise, showing that it had become a "safe space" for many students. From the first day, it was clear that many students were enrolled not only to learn the texts, but also to find a sense of community in the class. Throughout the semester, we covered a wide range of authors, including Leslie Marmon Silko, Cynthia Ozick, Bapsi Sidhwa, Clementine Wamariya, and Roxane Gay. One of the most popular texts was the graphic memoir, *An Almost American Girl*, by Robin Ha.

Published in 2020, Robin Ha's *An Almost American Girl* is a compelling teen memoir that explores themes of immigration, belonging, and how art can serve as a form of self-expression to help process traumatic experiences. Born in South Korea, Robin was raised by a single mother who faces constant judgment and ostracism from family and friends, and she is even bullied at her school for being a child of a single mother. Initially excited to be traveling to the United States for a much-needed vacation, Robin learns that her mother plans to move permanently to the U.S. so she can get married and settle there. This news shocks her, as she is suddenly dropped into a school where she is unfamiliar with the culture, customs, and language, which not only alienates her but also leads to many new instances of bullying for being a transplant and immigrant from South Korea. She also does not get along well with her stepfather's family and blames her mother for her misgivings. After being cut off from her friends in Korea, Robin turns to comics for comfort. Not until her mother enrolls her in a local comic book drawing class does her life turn around, and she gradually adjusts to her surroundings. Over time, we learn that her mother's marriage falls apart, leading them to move to Virginia after her mother's divorce. There, she meets friends from diverse cultural backgrounds at school. Robin even gets to return to Korea for a brief period, but is shocked to find that she is unable to fit into the Korean culture fully.

As we discussed this graphic novel in class, students from diverse backgrounds engaged with the text, regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity. The assignment for this class required them to write a memoir, either in a traditional narrative format or as a graphic novel, and then write a reflection afterwards explaining and reflecting on their choices. Pedagogically, memoir-writing is an exercise praised by many teachers and educators from K-12th grades to college level. For instance, National Council of Teachers of

English member Deborah Dean blogged about her experience assigning the memoir writing exercise to her students and was pleasantly surprised to find that the assignment helped a student named Amy, who had experienced a traumatic incident when a man broke into her house and held her mother and her hostage for hours. He finally left after finding enough money. In the memoir, Amy was able to find a way to move on from the experience and find meaning in her relationship. Later, in the parent-teacher conference, her father thanked Dean for giving him his daughter back.⁴ Greg Graham mentions in the article “Bringing Students To Life with Memoir Writing” that although life writing has often been criticized for being a “waste of time,” when “[g]iven permission and a listening ear, students’ painful stories pour out like blood from a nasty gash. And when these students’ voices are heard, they are empowered; some even say they find healing”; and hence, memoir-writing addresses the student as a “whole.”⁵ Memoir-writing, therefore, serves as an invaluable pedagogical tool, which can also enable students to process and confront their traumatic experiences.

After I assigned the memoir-writing assignments to the students, however, the response was not as positive as I had expected it to be. While many students in my class were looking forward to the assignment because they had a story they had wanted to share, many others feared the project. This unexpected response led me to reflect on the current times we are living in, where, despite finding a comfort zone, many students from immigrant families still fear writing their narratives and sharing their stories. Indeed, one student from an immigrant family who was very vocal in class has still not submitted their memoir. I think some students felt either intimidated by the process, or perhaps the exercise made them feel too vulnerable, so that they did not want to share their experiences or incidents even in a private manner with me.

When we think of social justice in the context of a Catholic university education and its objectives, the goal is always to ensure that we give dignity to others. However, in the post-pandemic era, where we are overwhelmed by social media, artificial intelligence, and a general decline in empathy and a rise in skepticism about the humanities as a field, this memoir-writing exercise has become a vital way for us to understand our limitations. Circling back to Adichie’s TED Talk, which celebrates the dismantling of stereotypes, the memoir-writing exercise revealed to me that, even within a Catholic university, self-reflection is a deep and crucial part of a student’s growth. That said, memoir-writing also challenges and discomfits the writer, pushing them to reconsider their worldview and reflect on their lives. I remember a few students in class telling me they didn’t think their lives were interesting enough to write about. This has stayed with me because it also shows many of these students are not pursuing majors in the humanities, but are instead choosing fields like business, nursing, or STEM. I also recall a student in my American Women of Color course who changed her major from nursing to political science because she wanted to make a difference in this world.

At a time when political forces are dismantling initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is ultimately the private Catholic institutions that provide a space for students, undergraduates, and graduates to take courses like American Women of Color, a course I initially thought would be canceled but ultimately was over-enrolled. The class also includes students from various ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, and disabilities, creating an inclusive space that allows them to find their voices through the memoir-writing assignment. Yet, teaching this course also made me pause and think about the future: Without such courses that recognize diverse identities within the institution or without multicultural centers, how will these students find a home and see themselves as “whole”?

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Unit 7, *National Geographic Learning*, https://www.creatingculturalcompetencies.org/uploads/1/1/2/6/112618631/5_the_danger_of_a_single_story_transcript.pdf, 85.

² Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” 87.

³ Pope Francis, “Letter of His Holiness on the Role of Literature in Formation,” The Holy See, July 17, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>.

⁴ Deborah Dean, “The Power of a Memoir: Unleashing Students’ Experiences,” November 20, 2019, NCTE.org, <https://ncte.org/blog/2019/11/the-power-of-memoir/>.

⁵ Greg Graham, “Bringing Students to Life with Memoir Writing,” January 29, 2013, *Education Week*, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-bringing-students-to-life-with-memoir-writing/2013/01>.