Reading Ourselves and the World Around Us

In “Reading Ourselves and the World Around Us,” Alberto Manguel describes his first memory of reading and then goes on to describe the many different ways that we read our world. He writes, “We all read ourselves the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are. We read to understand, or to begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function.”

Describe how reading has functioned in your life. What are your first memories of learning to read? What languages do you read in every day? Every week? What sorts of things do you read in your world? Since you have been at UMass, what do you read “to begin to understand” your environment? As you answer this question, reflect on the various ways that Manguel uses the word “read.”

Women Like Us

In “Women Like Us,” Edwidge Danticat describes writing as something both forbidden and irresistible to her as a young woman. She writes, “You thought that if you didn’t tell the stories, the sky would fall on your head.” Summarize Danticat’s motivations for writing—who does this writing give voice to? Describe personal writing that you have done in your life: song writing, diary keeping, letter writing. What were your motivations? How did these personal writing spaces influence the writer that you are today?

Talking Back

In “Talking Back,” bell hooks states that “[w]riting is a way to capture speech.” What in hooks context as a child required her to find a way “to capture speech”? Compare her uses of writing with those Danticat describes in “Women Like Us.

The Language of Fakebook

“Facebook is the novel we are all writing.” Manguel writes that “[w]e all read ourselves.” In “The Language of Fakebook,” Roiphe describes the ways that Facebook users write themselves, constructing identities, facades and fronts and personas carefully crafted. Reflect on the writing you use in social media and compare it to other types of personal writing that you do.

Shitty First Drafts

In Anne Lamott’s, “Shitty First Drafts,” she reflects on the struggle of writing, the inner voices that both propel her forward and hold her back in her craft. How does Lamott’s description of her writing process inform your ideas about your own writing? Think about the various types of writing that you do—in school, for social media, for personal reflections. How does this process vary for you depending on the language you are writing in?