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DURHAM, N.H. – When University of New Hampshire writing instructor Meredith Hall pictured the audience for her memoir, “Without a Map,” she imagined talking to a confidant, perhaps a close neighbor who would be the first person ever to hear the raw details of her life. Today, her memoir published April 11, 2007 by Beacon Press is in its third printing and climbing the New York Times Best-Sellers List.

Hall’s memoir – her first book – is ranked 34th on the hardcover nonfiction list, which includes Thomas Friedman’s “The World is Flat” and Barack Obama’s “The Audacity of Hope.”

“I had no idea that it would receive the public accolades. The book has convinced me that telling our stories to others is vital,” Hall says. “By nature, we are storytellers. I loved telling these stories. They were secrets.”

Hall’s moving but unsentimental memoir begins in 1965, when she becomes pregnant at 16. Shunned by her insular community of Hampton, N.H., she is then kicked out of the house by her mother. Her father and stepmother, who live in Epping, N.H., reluctantly take her in, hiding her before they finally banish her altogether.

After giving her baby up for adoption, Hall wanders recklessly through the Middle East, where she survives by selling her possessions and finally her blood. She returns to New England and stitches together a life that encircles her silenced and invisible grief. When he is 21, her lost son finds her. Hall learns that he grew up in poverty with an abusive father — in her own father's hometown. Their reunion is tender, turbulent, and ultimately redemptive. Hall's parents never ask for her forgiveness, yet as they age, she offers them her love.

Hall wrote “Without a Map” after winning the $50,000 Gift of Freedom Award from A Room of Her Own Foundation, which gave her the financial freedom to devote time to her memoir. In an apartment in San Francisco, she says she discovered the drug-like joy of writing.

“We each carry a reservoir of images. We circle them and circle them and circle them throughout our lives to make sense of them. If we turn our gaze to those moments, they emerge as the story of our lives,” she says. “I never felt like I was constructing or structuring. The words just fell on the page. For me, it was a matter of just showing up. The stories were very ready to be told.”
Hall asks her creative writing students at UNH to make lists of their life stories but cautions them that they are not keeping a personal journal.

“We are writing for a reader and there are clear and powerful obligations. We must be in control of the structure. This must be a process of discovery, and we must have matured into the ability to articulate its meaning,” she says. “There must be a larger truth. We shouldn’t write until we can contextualize our small stories into that larger truth.”

At 44, Hall graduated from Bowdoin College, and wrote her first essay, “Killing Chickens,” in 2002. She later earned a master’s in writing from UNH. Her other honors include a Pushcart Prize and notable essay recognition in Best American Essays; she was also a finalist for the Rona Jaffe Award. Hall’s work has appeared in the New York Times, Creative Nonfiction, The Southern Review, Five Points, Prairie Schooner, and several anthologies.

Hall will be Liane Hansen’s guest on NPR’s Weekend Edition on Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 13. She will teach a graduate-level memoir-writing course this fall at UNH, and is working on a novel and a collection of short stories. More about Hall is available at http://meredithhall.org/.

PHOTO
A high-resolution photo of Meredith Hall is available for download at http://unhinfo.unh.edu/news/img/meredith_hall.jpg.