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Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices Since College

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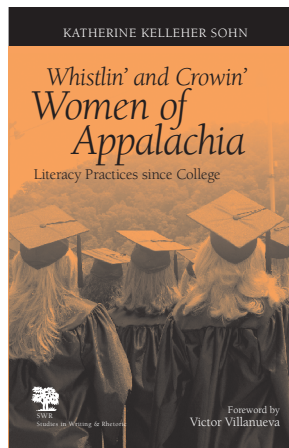
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Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices Since College. Sohn, Katherine Kelleher. Southern Illinois University Press, 2006. 199 pp. ISBN: 978-0809326822. \$28.50.

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Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia is a case study covering the literacy practices of Appalachian women during college and beyond. The book's cover art is a photograph of women in graduation caps and gowns, showing the backs of their heads as they look at the side of a mountain and an orange sky. This picture indicates a central theme in this book: the prospect of Appalachian women earning a college education, while still retaining the virtue and beauty of their home culture. Katherine Kelleher Sohn proceeds to present a study of the literacy practices of three women: Lucy, Jean, and Sarah. As Sohn asserts, "My primary purpose... was to determine how going to college had changed the literacy habits of former non-traditional, working class women and to ascertain how they were using literacy in the workplace, home, and community" (9). What Sohn discovered is that reading and writing "continues to be important and vital in their lives" (157). The women in the case studies now use reading and writing to interact with others in their everyday lives, learn new knowledge about the world at large, and improve their spirituality.

This is the story of how these women moved from the initial discomfort that they felt with academic literacy at college to more self-confident uses of literacy in their lives after college. Because the women developed literacies to meet the demands of their personal and professional lives, they disprove the Appalachian folk adage, "Whistlin' women and crowin' hens, always come to no good ends." The specific location, the Appalachian mountains, places this study within the context of what Beth Daniell has described as "a little narrative of literacy" (393) by offering insights into the literacy practices of a specific cultural group.

One of the more interesting arguments presented in the study is Sohn's belief in expressivist writing. She connects personal writing with an opportunity to establish these women's voices and identities. Many of the women were worried about start-

ing college, and Sohn advocates for expressivist writing as a gateway through the fear and resistance that the women initially felt in the classroom. If these women had not discovered “the power of expressivist writing,” none of these later applications of academic, social, and workplace literacy would have been possible (5). Although this type of writing is not as privileged as disembodied, academic discourse, Sohn demonstrates “the importance of expressivist writing for non-traditional students” (66). In doing so, Sohn argues persuasively that writing expressively can establish an excellent literacy foundation for working-class students. Essentially, Sohn suggests that without their initial contact with academic literacy through personal writing, the women may not have advanced through college.

Sohn labels the methodology for her research into these women’s lives as “naturalistic observation,” and it would be easy to label this study as a qualitative inquiry. However, the research could also be described as narrative inquiry, especially with regards to its presentation of data. Sohn read *No More Heroes* by Chris Offutt and liked how he presented his interviews in a narrative form, so she decided “to weave quotations from Lucy, Jean, and Sarah into narratives” (21). She felt even more confident about her decision to construct narratives after reading Gian Pagnucci’s *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Meaning Making*. This decision by Sohn makes these case studies very enjoyable to read. Instead of objectifying the data and layering over what these women have to say with a clinical tone, Sohn shows compassion and respect for the voices of these women by letting them be heard.

Sohn’s research aligns itself with Deborah Brandt’s ideas about accumulating literacy. In her article, “Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth Century,” Brandt maintains that “literacy ‘piles up’ in the twentieth century... in the rising levels of formal schooling that begin to accumulate... in families” (664). In her study into the literacy practices of families in Wisconsin, Brandt wanted “to trace the effects of accumulating literacy through the contours of individual lives” (665). Sohn’s study reaffirms this idea. Lucy, Jean, and Sarah had used literacy in many ways before they entered college, and Sohn studies the effects of literacy on their lives after college. “Since the women came to college with the ability to read and write on a certain level,” Sohn states, “they built on it with academic and other literacies” (155). This accumulation of literacy may be best viewed in the practical uses of reading and writing within the workplace. Sohn argues that literacy empowered these women to improve their lives through better employment and its perceived benefits.

Just about anyone—including graduate students, literacy workers, and writing center staff—would benefit from reading this study. But composition teachers and writing program administrators who work with large populations of non-traditional students would probably benefit the most. In fact, Sohn includes two sections, “Implications for Teachers” and “Implications for Colleges,” in her conclusion, which seem to be addressed to these two particular groups. Because of this study, the two groups can see first-hand some of the implications of their pedagogical decisions. In other words, they can see what works in a composition classroom for non-traditional students and what types of writing will have the most far-reaching consequences.

Two possibilities for further conversation on this topic emerge from the research materials. The first is more research into the negative side of literacy. Sohn details the positive impact of literacy on these women’s lives, but she only hints at some of the

negative aspects literacy acquisition might have had. Although some might not think the negative aspects need to be investigated, they could help researchers to understand such things as the real motivations for women seeking to improve their literacy practices. Another area for further discussion includes the effects these women's literacy acquisition had on their families. Sohn mentions that supporting their families was a goal for these women—their hope that getting an education would model this literacy process for their children. Sohn suggests that this impact occurred, but she could develop this aspect of the study much more. This is important because it would celebrate the fact that literacy is accumulated over generations.

The three case studies in *Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia* show readers how literacy is used and developed after college. In short, Sohn's research demonstrates how these women—Lucy, Jean, and Sarah—have used literacy practices since college to make their own lives more meaningful.

Works Cited

- Brandt, Deborah. "Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth Century." *College English* 57.6 (1995): 649-68.
- Daniell, Beth. "Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture." *College Composition and Communication* 50.3 (1999): 393-410.