

Spring 2007

Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing

Suzanne Van Dam
Finlandia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Van Dam, Suzanne. "Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 99–101, doi:10.25148/clj.1.2.009522.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.



Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing. Ruth Ray.
Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000. 690 pp.
ISBN: 0-8139-1939-8. \$39.50.

A Review by Suzanne Van Dam,
Assistant Professor of English at Finlandia University



As an astute researcher and steadfast advocate for the elderly, Ruth Ray challenges many misguided assumptions about the elderly and reaffirms the crucial role that stories play in all of our lives in her recent book, *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*. As a professor of English with a joint appointment in gerontology at Wayne State University, Ray's approach to studying the aging process is unique. It occurs, as she puts it, "at the crossroads of narrative theory, feminism, and gerontology" (27). She relies upon both social constructionism and feminist criticism to inform her research. She explains her orientation in this way:

While most gerontological research on life review and reminiscence takes its cue from empirical studies in cognitive and clinical psychology, I pursue knowledge of the self through *story*, or more accurately, the contingency of multiple, ever-shifting stories that older people tell about themselves. I see development as a narrative construction and an interpretive process dependent on 'the backward gaze of recollection' as much as the 'forward-looking arrow of linear time,' (27).

This narrative approach allows her to focus on "individual development within particular socio-historical contexts, [studying how] people in certain groups develop according to the demands and expectations of their culture, family, and peers, as well as the historical period in which they live" (31).

Beyond Nostalgia's central thesis is that writing one's life stories promotes personal growth, while senior writing groups, with their stimulating discussions and supportive milieus, play an important role in helping seniors re-vision their lives. A corollary to this argument is that men and women engage in life review differently, with older women



generally emphasizing the role of relationships and older men generally emphasizing the role of accomplishments. Furthermore, she notes that the males in her studies often changed in response to the comments of female writing group members, adding more emotional and relational content to their stories as a result of group interactions.

In her research for *Beyond Nostalgia*, Ray observed eight writing groups in six different centers, encompassing seniors from many different socio-economic, educational and ethnic backgrounds. She initially interviewed existing writing groups from a mainly white, college-educated neighborhood in metropolitan Detroit. She then expanded the study to include more racially mixed groups closer to the Detroit urban center. And finally, she developed five new “Write Your Life Story” groups in urban centers whose clientele were very poor, with limited access to health care, transportation, or opportunities for social interaction.

The book includes dialogues that illustrate the distinct voices, senses of humor, and group dynamics of each of these groups. Despite the differences in socio-economic or racial backgrounds, what emerges is a shared *generational identity* that spans these diverse groups. Ray explains that *generational identity* “relies on the collective memory of major national events such as wars, revolutions, and natural disasters that create a break in the normative life course and bind otherwise unrelated individuals together” (49). Thus events such as the Great Depression or World War II bind many of these seniors together in a way that transcends other distinguishing factors. Seniors frequently use the writing group to help recall their generation’s unique responses to hardships. “Many writers told how they amused themselves during their childhood,” Ray explains,

describing simple games like dress-up, hide-the-thimble, marbles, jacks, hopscotch with a flat stone, roller skating, hide ‘n seek, and paper dolls. The purpose of these stories is often to celebrate the imaginative make-do elements of a depression era childhood and the value of ‘being happy with what you have,’ as opposed to the ‘buy-me-something-new’ and ‘I’m-never-satisfied-with-what-I-have’ attitude of today’s children. (55)

Beyond Nostalgia is organized into seven research-based chapters, with an “interchapter” between each one. The interchapters are vivid, first-person stories written by (or about) the women participating in the writing groups. As the distinguishing feature of this book, these narratives give us insight into how a diverse range of older women recall and then makes sense of their lives. Ray points out that socio-economic class, along with “age, race, gender, ethnicity, and able-bodiedness, profoundly affect the shape and quality of a life” (73). Within the context of a writing group, however, some past injustices can be mitigated. For example, Selma, a black woman in a mainly white writing group, explained that she could not establish an accurate genealogical record of her family because many members of her family never appeared in official records. She realized that the white-dominated society of the time essentially erased her family’s identity. Now as she recollects and recreates her story, however, she is able to demonstrate the destructive effects of racism both to her writing group and to her family; thus a personal story becomes a vehicle for something much larger than private recollections (100).



Ray contends that there are significant differences within genders, too. For example, although women across all races emphasized the importance of motherhood, the ideology of motherhood differs between black and white cultures. White women tend to emphasize the nuclear family and economic dependence on men, whereas “afrocentric ideology of motherhood extends the boundaries of family to include kinfolk and ‘othermothers’ who share responsibility with natural mothers for childrearing; it also integrates women’s roles as economic providers into their mothering relationships” (95).

Ray examines how gender affects both identity and the writing process. Women outnumbered men 5-to-1 in the writing groups. Because of this imbalance, writing groups provided a unique environment where women frequently “served as informed tutors, assisting men in the developmental process of learning to express feelings through personal writing” (185). For many men, this is the first time they have been so marginalized in a working (rather than domestic) environment, and many became open to changing their approaches to life stories.

Some of Ray’s strongest writing comes at the end of the book in the interchapter titled “Negotiating Normal.” She initiates a life writing group in a senior center that offers programs for seniors who are some of the most neglected and isolated seniors in her community—impoverished, abandoned by their families, and often imprisoned in a failing body and in the alienating psychological conditions of severe depression, mental illness, or memory loss. Many of the seniors who participated in these 10-week sessions showed small, but significant changes in their levels of social attachment and alertness. Many had a strong sense of accomplishment when viewing their final story board or life story as it was written down and presented to others, again reinforcing the power of stories to heal and promote personal growth and development.

Though grounded on narrative theory, feminist criticism, and social constructionist methodology, Ray’s book is refreshingly free of academic jargon and easily accessible to the lay community working with or otherwise relating to older individuals. Many would benefit from reading *Beyond Nostalgia* including nurses and other medical care professionals, aides and staff administrators at senior centers, nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, as well as the adult children of the elderly. And although it is not a “how-to” guide on initiating a writing group, individuals interested in facilitating a life story writing group could certainly use Ray’s arguments to help leverage dollars from federal programs or private foundations to help fund transportation and other support to encourage isolated seniors to participate.

Clearly the research contained in *Beyond Nostalgia* is not simply an academic interest for Ray, but a quiet passion, a commitment to being that scholar-advocate who uses her intellectual capital for social good. She exposes the frustrating effects of ageism, and moves beyond it to show that the sharing of life’s stories provides a critical stage in adult development, and that, as she puts it, “age can be interpreted positively, and that older adults still have an important place in the world” (157).