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Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography

Eli Goldblatt

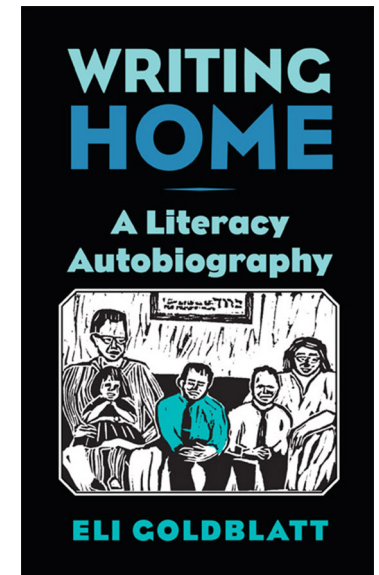
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The literacy autobiography is often assigned to help writers become more aware of how their literacy pasts affect their written present. In *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*, Eli Goldblatt similarly reconstructs his literacy history to contextualize his current literate commitments. In the process, he stretches what he calls "the clinical-smelling term 'literacy'" until it is pliable and durable enough to account for a lifetime of literate experiences beyond books and schools (5). In its exploration of personal language history, *Writing Home* resembles Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self*, Min-Zhan Lu's *Shanghai Quartet*, and Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*. But Goldblatt's book uses less academic theory than these and lets the social tumult of literacy acquisition speak for itself. The humor and raw candor with which he tells his stories pulls literacy theory out into the daylight of lived experience, showing the full pleasure and pain of finding one's home through writing.

Writing Home is built around the tension between writing alone and writing with others. The desire to bridge community, school, and personal literacies is familiar ground for Goldblatt, but here the taut stretch among these literate realms is given the context of one full life. While the book's chronological chapters follow the phases of Goldblatt's life, the narrative within the chapters often jumps forward and circles back, resembling oral more than written storytelling. As it moves through specific literacy events and practices, the narrative spirals around explorations of gender, race, religion, and class, as one might expect from a writer who takes the social grounding of literacy seriously.

The first two chapters detail Goldblatt's childhood and schooling, beginning on the army base in Germany where his father was employed and ending in a suburban U.S. high school where he finds his poetic aspirations. These two chapters span the longest period of time in the book and contain as many life-altering realizations as any childhood might. Here, Goldblatt's insights are mostly literate: he comes to appreciate school as something he "always knew how to do" no matter where his army



family was relocated (29); he comes to understand literary analysis as construction of meaning “deeply embedded in context but careful in respect to text” (37). The scenes in which religious literacies come to the fore—Goldblatt and his uncle analyze the *kaddish* prayer together after his father’s death; he learns to lay *tefillin*, the leather strap wound around the hand to form Hebrew letters in prayer—are beautiful and resoundingly significant, showing Goldblatt’s growing awareness of literacy as routine and pain, “brute work” and “mystical event” (42). Here he comes to know how the daily activity of literacy “requires considerable devotion but rewards effort with an ineluctable sense of belonging” among others who practice literacy with a shared sense of history (43).

The third and fourth chapter narrate the evolving split in Goldblatt’s identity as a solitary “brooding intellectual” and public, social writer. Here we see Goldblatt as college student: following historical threads through literature, aligning himself with William Carlos Williams, transferring colleges, specializing in classics, working at a printing press. We watch him creating a myth of himself as the hard-working poet/manual laborer, which in doses of authorial self-consciousness he both treasures and gently self-mocks. The chapters expand the tension between the “ordinariness” of public working life and the liveliness of an inner literary life, with Goldblatt’s ascetic tendencies running up against his real world literacy encounters. The period culminates in a resigned understanding that he “didn’t need to be a monk for poetry” and might instead look outward to cultivate what he calls a poem-life (94).

Throughout the next three chapters, Goldblatt’s narrative wanders along with his post-college experiences. He criss-crosses the U.S. for work and romantic relationships, doubling back to revisit childhood understandings of Judaism and his father’s medical profession. He enters and leaves medical school, struggles to find work in recession-era Philadelphia, commits to teaching and a marriage, all the while developing a meta-awareness of his everyday encounters with language. He begins to take his literary self more seriously, dating his journal entries and keeping “as full a picture of internal and external developments as [he] could” (133). He winks at the reader by admitting the record was kept partly for future reconstruction, but the passage especially shows his maintenance of an internal and external literate split. As the autobiography crosses its midway point, Goldblatt still defines space and people by their separate literate activities— “We would have to...call to each other across the valley created by our separating literacies” (149)—holding other language users at arms length. Even with all his moving, the chapters show him using words to make walls, distilling a personal literate identity separate from his accumulated life and work literacies.

Goldblatt is pushed beyond his own impasse in the last three chapters when a divorce, feminist movement, and Central American revolution crack him open (241). He travels beyond the boundaries of his classroom, the U.S., and of English, finding solitude in writing while simultaneously joining community-driven movements. He repeats that travel taught him to “pay attention” as he was forced to listen across the gulf of languages and upend his ethnocentricity. When his *extranjero* status and fledging Spanish cause an unpleasant sense of isolation, he stops isolating himself to write. He realizes writers don’t “need art to distance [them]” since “estrangement in language can happen to anyone at any time” (246). Thus, these final chapters find

Goldblatt realigning his notion of audience: “If I filled my consciousness with as many types of people as I could, then when I wrote I would be writing with them” (194). The more “types” he encountered, the less he wanted to write alone. By way of much wandering, Goldblatt’s travel points him back home to Philadelphia. Once there and teaching again he describes seeing the full landscape of literacy rather than its partitions, and begins to write not just for or about himself, but for the full range of literacy users from his past and in his present.

After moving through so much literate life with him, readers might hope for Goldblatt to make more of his vast experiences. At times the analysis of events is heavy-handed, but at other times it lacks connection—how might the literacy campaign he witnessed in Nicaragua relate to his migrant co-workers in California for example? Very occasionally one hopes for more of the powerful political echoes of literacy to be traced across the phases or locations of his stories. However, the last chapter does this beautifully, including panoramic sweeps of the characters and scenes that populate the book’s narrative.

For literacy teachers and researchers, *Writing Home* offers much, reminding us to ask ourselves and our students where our literacy practices come from and why the histories of those practices matter. The book shows the fruitfulness of assigning a literacy autobiography in the first place—accounting for one’s literacy experiences reveals how much literacy learning occurs in unexpected settings, across a variety of communities, with strangers as much as with family. Individual chapters of the book could certainly be used as autobiography models in writing classrooms or community writing groups, with the chapters describing Jewish literate routine and central American travel being perhaps the most delicately written.

Literacy researchers will enjoy watching Goldblatt’s literacy practices and technologies move with one writer across a specific period of time. We see letter and journal-writing, weavings, lesson plans, recipes, prayers, speeches, and countless notebooks and sketches. We see the struggle and rewards of collaborative literacy projects like political movements, poetry readings, and printing presses, and watch how social situations put pressure on the direction of one person’s literate life. For all of these reasons, the autobiography is a pleasure to read. But it is also an important reminder about the hard work of literacy and the ongoing struggle of all writers to find their homes in language.