

Book Review *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*, by
Eli Goldblatt

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Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography, by Eli Goldblatt. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. 258 pp.

An interesting discussion took place recently on the Writing Program Administrators listserv (WPA-L) surrounding the question: “Is the literacy narrative dead?” As someone who assigns literacy narratives in first-year courses, I followed the discussion closely—perhaps hoping my own classroom practices would be vindicated. What surprised me most, however, was not the general consensus of those who responded (a resounding “No!”), but just how complex the question is in the first place. After all, what exactly *is* a literacy narrative and what do we mean when we reference it? As a provocation to reflect on one’s literacy practices and the ways such practices shape our lives, literacy narratives can be expressed in any number of modes and genres—as a quick search through the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives will attest—so, maybe the question needs to be asked a different way. Eli Goldblatt’s recently published *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography* reframes the question in just such a way. *Writing Home* implicitly asks not what a literacy narrative *is*, but rather what it *can be* given enough space to move. As an autobiography detailing a thirty-year history of one man’s literacy practices, *Writing Home* is a marathon. Premised on exploring “two competing and coinciding concepts in literacy: the individualist ideology of Western literary tradition in contrast with the broader social meaning of literacy that defines a group’s identity or a nation’s character” (3), *Writing Home* works to demonstrate the tensions between these relations in every chapter.

While the introduction and final chapter work to provide a theoretical frame, the bulk of *Writing Home* proceeds chronologically. Following Goldblatt’s childhood experiences while stationed in Germany with a father who “identified himself more with medicine than with the military” (20), the first chapter, “Tour of Duty,” begins to make a distinction between the private life of early reading—the *All About* book series, biographies, Hardy Boys, stories of young braves on vision quests—and the

public life of the classroom and base. The second chapter, “The Right to Mourn,” follows Goldblatt’s struggle with Jewish identity and the many “sacred but technological” literacies encountered in the aftermath of his father’s death. As Goldblatt struggles to read the Mourner’s Kaddish, for instance, his uncle offers him a way to access the prayer not by simply reading it in English, which seemed “distant and dry,” but by gently prompting him to read it closely and think about the way the words are used in other moments in the service apart from the context of mourning. At the same time, his cousin teaches Goldblatt how to lay *tefillin* and begins to demystify the arcane lore of the Jewish tradition. From these experiences, Goldblatt observes: “one aspect of reading and writing—indeed, of all learning—involves just the brute work of maintaining routine” (42). This second chapter, perhaps more than any other chapter in *Writing Home*, is sufficiently self-contained and could be assigned in the classroom. Much like Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* or Reginald Dwayne Betts’s *A Question of Freedom*, this chapter works to describe the complicated relationship between identity and literacy in a way that is accessible and relatable.

Chapter three, “Into the Daedalean Dreamscape,” follows Goldblatt through Beloit College where he begins to write poetry and immerse himself in the study of the Western tradition. It was at Beloit that Goldblatt began to read Martin Buber, whose influence is returned to again and again throughout *Writing Home*. The fourth chapter, “Following Williams,” follows Goldblatt as he leaves Beloit, enrolls in Cornell University to make an earnest study of the classics, and—towards the end—decides to go into medicine as his own father and the American poet referenced in the title, William Carlos Williams, had done. At Cornell, Goldblatt is torn between his identity as a laboring poet and his ivy league surroundings: “I would be inside the great university but not a part of it, neither cheerleader nor activist nor athlete but a poet on the edge, reading my way into the tradition but bound to write outside of it” (78). It was also at Cornell that Goldblatt would first read his work publicly, begin to socialize with other writers, and decide that he “didn’t have to be a monk for poetry” (94). The fifth chapter, “Dry Creek Road,” discusses Goldblatt’s various travels and jobs between Cornell and Case Western, where he was to enroll in medical school. Working with a Spanish-speaking Mexican population on vineyards in Northern California, Goldblatt realizes that literacy affects immediate social relations: “For the first time, I wanted to know a language not for poetry or religion but because other people were speaking and I wanted to join the conversation” (108). The sixth chapter, “White Coat,” begins at Case Western Reserve University and ends with Goldblatt’s move to Philadelphia the following year. While in medical school, Goldblatt found it difficult to reconcile his vocation as a poet and his future as a medical doctor. From the beginning, Goldblatt notes, he was overly critical of the very medical establishment he was trying to join.

Chapters seven through nine follow Goldblatt from Case Western and a career in medicine to a new career as a teacher, a marriage, and an eight-month stint in Mexico and Central America during the time of the *Revolución Nicaragüense*. Chapter seven, “Entering Philadelphia,” discusses his first marriage and the beginnings of his teaching career in Philadelphia. The possibility of teaching comes to him after a reading and discussion at a Quaker retreat center. As Goldblatt notes, “standing before

this open-faced group in a small wooden classroom, I felt just a hint that I could teach as well as write,” though teaching poetry at the time was out of the question as it was “too close to the bone” (155). Soon after, Goldblatt begins teaching science and math at the Neighborhood Journey School, an alternative school. Chapter eight, “Beyond the Fathers,” continues to focus on Goldblatt’s early teaching career, the end of his first marriage, and a looming trip south. The ninth chapter, “*Viajeros, Extranjeros*,” begins with Goldblatt’s first night in Mexico as a *viajeros*, a young international traveler. Much like the experience with the migrant workers in Northern California, during his travels south Goldblatt further realizes that language can be a “particular channel for immediate human interaction” rather than just an intellectual challenge or source for literary meaning (202). The final chapter, “High Five at Second Base,” picks back up in Philadelphia and Goldblatt’s teaching position at the Neighborhood Journey School (renamed the Neighborhood Academy).

One of the most poignant moments, for me, comes in the final chapter as Goldblatt discusses his own son’s experiences in the university. His son’s frustration and boredom with the institutions of higher learning reflect larger failures Goldblatt observes in the institution as a whole. Goldblatt is “haunted by the image of classes camped out in the ruins of an ancient Roman public forum, endlessly rehearsing information that makes no sense of the world students face in their personal lives” (253). Goldblatt’s ambivalence towards the university’s larger cultural role, and his own role in that institution, emerges from a unique view of literacy that loses its ability to effect change to the degree to which it remains anchored to the lecture halls and offices of higher education. From this anecdote, Goldblatt uses the rest of the chapter to theoretically situate his narrative in a way that would be familiar to scholars working within composition and literacy studies. Despite the—at times—jarring shift, the final chapter’s move towards theory provides a much-needed frame and context for the preceding chapters and Goldblatt’s varied life. Through the many roles and stations in Goldblatt’s life, literacy is that constant element which binds the many relations—between individuals, cultures, and technologies—into a unified narrative. For Goldblatt, “Human conversation fostered by media such as print or symbol, moving image or sculptural form, envelopes us in relationships,” though the challenge is always to “find a purpose more valuable than self-justification or solipsistic tautology in the metaphor of literacy as relationship” (239).

In an older article that still deserves much more attention than it gets, Jim Corder suggests that each of us is a fictive narrative produced by language. But, as Corder is quick to point out, this does not mean that such narratives are “limited, valueless, ignorant, despicable, or ‘merely subjective’” (17). To the contrary, if emerging from a generative ethos, such narratives can broaden our private universe and foreclose closure itself. Such an ethos is to be found in Eli Goldblatt’s *Writing Home* and its central vision of literacy as an ethical relation. As such, this book deserves a broad audience of writers and social activists outside of the academy, but literacy scholars and writing teachers would be particularly remiss in not attending to all that *Writing Home* has to offer. Far from being “dead,” as was questioned on the WPA-L listserv, Goldblatt’s work proves that we are just beginning to show what the literacy narrative is capable of.

WORKS CITED

Corder, Jim W. "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love." *Rhetoric Review* 4.1 (1985): 16-32. Print.