
Reviewed by Ted Kesler, Queens College, City University of New York

Over the years, Eli Goldblatt gave a literacy autobiography assignment to his undergraduate and graduate students “in order to help them see the intimate ways that reading and writing influence their lives” (3). Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography emerged from his desire to fulfill this assignment himself. This is a well-established college assignment in various fields of study. I, for one, began giving this assignment in the fall semester, 2010 to my cohort of pre-service master’s degree elementary education students in my two sequential literacy courses after reading an exchange of e-mails on the listserv of the Literacy Research Association (LRA). The 23 participants in this e-mail exchange expressed several significant reasons for giving this assignment, including: recognizing each individual’s distinct literacy journey, discerning and valuing multiple literacies, challenging the misconception of one neutral, universal set of literacy skills, and honoring the social, historical, political, and cultural dimensions that shape our literate lives.

Writing Home is organized into ten chapters that recount Goldblatt’s literacy experiences in the first 30 years of his life, mostly in chronological order. Chapter 1, “Tour of Duty,” recounts Goldblatt’s literacy experiences growing up in seven different homes in four US states and Europe, including Landstuhl, Germany, as the son of an officer in the US Army Medical Corps. Chapter 2, “The Right to Mourn,” focuses on his middle and high school years in Silver Spring, Maryland, especially contending with his father’s death when Goldblatt was 13. In chapter 3, “Into the Daedalean Dreamscape,” Goldblatt describes his first year at Beloit College, where he began studying poetry and classics. In chapter 4, “Following Williams,” Goldblatt describes his half year working at a printing press in Amherst, Massachusetts, followed by his half year in San Francisco, then his three years at Cornell University, where he continued his study of poetry and classics. “Following Williams” refers to Goldblatt’s decision to pursue a medical career as a doctor/poet, as Williams Carlos Williams did, and thus following in his father’s footsteps. In chapter 5, “Dry Creek Road,” Goldblatt describes his year transition between Cornell and medical school. Dry Creek Road refers to the road where he lived with a college roommate, working alongside poor migrant workers in the vineyards of northern California that made Goldblatt realize: “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).

Chapter 6, “White Coat,” describes Goldblatt’s year at Case Western Reserve Medical School, where he strove “to keep making my imagination engage with the real world” (130). In the end, Goldblatt struggled with reconciling the passion for connection that he experienced as a medical...
student with the isolation of a writer’s life. He chose to leave medical school, but wondered: “Would writing cut me off from lives I valued or from those who valued me?” (140). Chapter 7, “Entering Philadelphia,” focuses on Goldblatt’s first marriage, his first teaching position as a science teacher in an alternative high school for runaway teenagers, and his first forays into constructing his life as a poet. Chapter 8, “Beyond the Fathers,” focuses on Goldblatt’s high school teaching experience and the breakup of his marriage. In chapter 9, “Viajeros, Extranjeros,” Goldblatt focuses on his eight month journey through Mexico and Central America at a time of intense political turmoil and brutal civil wars. Goldblatt was one of many viajeros, or international travelers, and in Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas had recently taken control, extranjeros, or foreigners hoping to prove that they could contribute to rebuilding the country in the aftermath of revolution. Finally, chapter 10, “High Five at Second Base,” recounts Goldblatt's return to Philadelphia, where “teaching would meld with writing to clarify and sharpen the differences and similarities between working with students and addressing readers” (238), and developing a sense of home. The chapter accelerates his literacy autobiography to the present day. Goldblatt has discovered: “I write to belong, and every piece of writing defines the threads by which we connect with others across time and space. One is clearly always alone and never alone within a written text” (239).

Writing Home is unusual as an academic book. By the author’s own acknowledgement, explicit theory is deliberately subverted to give way to narrative. Theory is articulated in the introductory chapter, “From Garret to Tree House,” and in the final chapter. Theory then serves as bookends to the narrative of Goldblatt’s literacy life. Put another way, Goldblatt’s literacy life illuminates the theory that frames this book.

In the final chapter, Goldblatt articulates three central themes that pervade his narrative: the individual and collective nature of text, the materiality of language, and the desire for human connection that words embody (239). He explains that the individual and collective nature of text is “the dialectic of individual and group, in writing as in every other human interaction” (243). Indeed, Goldblatt begins his book with a quote from Bakhtin’s The Dialogic Imagination: “In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words.” In a process called appropriation, Bakhtin (1981) explains the inherent struggle as an individual filters and takes on the cacophony of other voices in society. For example, Bakhtin states:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (294)
This is the struggle that Goldblatt’s literacy autobiography illustrates. His narrative explicates “the bridge between individual and communal senses of self in language” (6).

Goldblatt gives two meanings to the theme the materiality of language. First, he means “[f]inding the words to say what I mean—or unearthing what I mean through the words I say” (245). This meaning was particularly apparent in his chapters of his year in medical school (chapter 6, “White Coat”), when he struggled to learn the language of medicine, and of his eight months in Mexico and Central America (chapter 9, “Vianjeros, Extranjeros”), where he had to learn to communicate in Spanish and contended with “the sheer bewilderment of not knowing how to find the public toilet or what friendship could get you killed” (244). Goldblatt applies this struggle for the right word and for using the quotidian in fresh, new ways to writing poetry: “the poet is in the business of discovering what cannot be known or said except by way of the poem” (245). The other meaning of the materiality of language is the fact that written words take up space (whether in digital or paper forms). Goldblatt was reminded of this fact when all the books and journals and notepads in his backpack far outweighed his clothes when he returned to Philadelphia at the end of his Central America and Mexico adventures. Goldblatt explains: “the material being of text is itself a metaphor for the promise of relationship that language offers one human with or among others” (247).

Goldblatt’s third theme, the desire for human connection that words embody, comes from his realization that “most of my understanding about writing came at painful and joyful moments away from classrooms” (247). Goldblatt celebrates literacy that is enacted within the Deweyan concept of joint activity: collaborative community efforts that are “unconnected to school and off the grid of conventional power differences” (252), when “literacy shrugs off correctness or diction as its defining qualities” (252). He values “writing across communities” (5). Conversely, Goldblatt is disparaging of university settings where he himself spends most of his time. He laments students, including his own son, who are “endlessly rehearsing information that makes no sense of the world students face in their personal lives” and that “the very structures in which we teach tend to render our utterances hollow and our assignments the arbitrary tasks for prisoners serving out life sentences” (253). Goldblatt asserts that “literature, rhetoric, and linguistics grow poorer when they remain purely academic studies” (2). A second dimension of human connection is how “[t]he individual striving of a given artist becomes consecrated by the collective effort of artists over time” (253). This dimension harkens to Bakhtin’s dialogic, multivoiced construction of literacy: that our intentional uses of language derive from other people’s uses, contexts, and intentions with that language.

It’s fair to say that Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography expresses many of the values that the contributors to the LRA listserv exchange articulated. This book provides students and professors one person’s fully realized
exploration of his literacy, which strongly shows the melding of sociocultural dimensions in each of our expressions of a literate life.

*Flushing, New York*

**Works Cited**