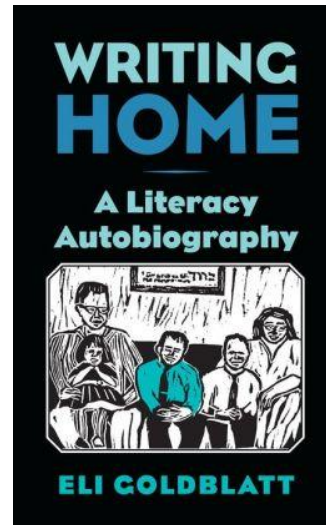


Eli Goldblatt, **Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography**, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012, 258 pp., \$32.00 (paperback).

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I approached this book with a general interest in and familiarity with autobiographical writing and filmmaking, yet with no clear sense of what the subgenre of the literacy autobiography might actually entail. In reading *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*, one becomes the autobiographer's privileged travelling companion, as he undertakes a very specific form of life review: the reconstruction of his journey toward literacy. Literacy, here, must be understood to encompass more than the mastery of writing and reading, although it is certainly that as well. The memories reconstructed by author Eli Goldblatt, professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing at Temple University, pertain to those very structures of the symbolic that each of us learns to navigate through trial and error and which not only shape our individuation processes but that also consolidate that sense of self among and with a wider socius.



Along the way, Eli Goldblatt's autobiographical recollections offer fascinating insights into an important swath of social and political history since the early Cold War era. As a child of the 1950s, Goldblatt's familial circumstances situated him at the interstices of multiple cultures, institutions, and ideological frameworks. Together with his siblings, Aaron and Sharon, Eli had to be relocated at regular intervals with his parents, Selma and Harry Goldblatt, throughout the latter's tour of duty as plastic surgeon specializing in facial reconstruction with the U.S. Army. By the time of his father's untimely death, when Eli was only 13, the Goldblatt family had lived in multiple U.S. cities and also abroad on military bases in Germany. Those early years of repeated reacclimation in different settings forced the family to develop systematic methods for coping with change, including close familial loyalties forged through the Jewish identity that set them apart as a minority among military families.

The early sections of this literacy autobiography offer strikingly mature observations of the author's childhood experiences, of military life generally, and of his father's personal struggles to succeed professionally amidst the insidious military hierarchies while also standing by his family. While these early reminiscences comprise the building blocks that launch the entire narrative, in some regards they also betray the greatest discrepancy between the author and the projected self. Perhaps my own early childhood was so fully "preconscious" that I have difficulty conceiving that anyone could at such a tender age already harbor such mature insights about the interpersonal dynamics between one's parents, or indeed, the parent-child dynamic itself. Of course, Goldblatt's insights, like those of any autobiographer who chooses to reconstruct a childhood, are today necessarily generated from an adult retrospect; yet the lack of

reflexivity about this reconstructive process arguably weakens its credibility in that early stage of building a story when the reader's trust needs to be not so much assumed as earned.

Where this autobiography gains momentum and conviction is during the description of the author's teenage years. He writes in moving terms about the abyss left by the sudden death of his father and his confusion about how grieving was "supposed" to take place. That chapter, titled "The Right to Mourn," exemplifies a significant turning point in Goldblatt's recognition of ritual as a form of meaning making that also includes the use of language to enact larger symbolic gestures that bind the individual to the *socius*. He describes his disorientation when Orthodox relatives came to join the family in mourning. Because his father had introduced him years earlier to Reform Judaism, Goldblatt could only imperfectly recite the mourner's *Kaddish* in Aramaic and, although impressed with the mystical and powerful sounds of the language, its meaning remained elusive. His uncle Herb took the time to explain the meaning of the words in a way that helped Goldblatt to feel included in the community created by that language. As well, his uncle's gift to him of various Judaica, including a *tallis*, or prayer shawl, a daily prayer book, and a set of *tefillin*, two black leather boxes containing biblical texts on parchment, provided symbolic anchor points for a young boy very much at sea following his father's death. While Goldblatt acknowledges that he didn't ultimately gain any deep relationships with others through this initiation and continued to remain unclear as to the nature of God and his own relationship to such a deity, the rituals to which he was exposed nonetheless proffered insight into the value of routine as means to performatively reinforce and affirm one's place within a community.

Goldblatt displays a compassion toward his earlier self, particularly the internal tug of war that defined his teens and 20s. He felt he had to choose between exploring, on the one hand, the world of language, discourse, and signification—embodied for him in the ongoing discovery of writers of literature, poetry, and philosophy—and, alternately, the world he associated with his father, whose material coordinates seemed firmly rooted in the laws of science and in practical service to the world through a profession deemed honorable and also economically secure. Of his high school participation in the team sport of wrestling, he recalls it afforded him entry into a group identity and rigorous corporeal self-discipline. Adherence to the unique blend of art and athletics that characterize wrestling also provided the young Eli a means to work through the conflictual feelings beginning to stir within him. The self-starvation that teenage wrestlers had to undergo to maintain certain weight restrictions also recalls how anorexia often emerges in adolescence as a dysfunction offering a sense of self-control not only over a changing body but also within a society whose codes and strictures have not yet been mastered.

Goldblatt's capacity to remember with such vivid detail the interior thoughts and musings of his youth and 20s seems absolutely uncanny until one learns he began maintaining a journal as a teenager; he even quotes from certain entries to conjure forth that earlier authorial voice, a voice that also sometimes betrays his early efforts to replicate the poetry or philosophical introspection of whichever literary muse was influential during any of the many existential crises of his student years. It is difficult not to empathize and even identify with the inner struggles of a young person with a strong humanist bent and an inclination toward literary expression, who perceives this proclivity as the source of an ethical quandary regarding the best possible means of serving humanity. Goldblatt's existential search drew him to various points across the continental United States, studying both poetry and science as an

undergraduate, and then enrolling in medical school. As an intern, he discovered both the pleasures of service to patients, indeed to entire growing families, improving not only their physical well-being but also offering moral support; simultaneously, he grappled as an intern with arrogant policies and procedures of a highly patriarchal field. He eventually abandoned medicine to more fully devote himself to poetry and the exploration of creative writing, even as it required odd day jobs that kept his mind idling and ready for late-night poetry writing and reading. Certainly, this is a dilemma with which young people grapple in equal measure today, amidst an emergent global economy predicated upon neoliberal cultivation of a growing gap between rich and poor. Goldblatt's personal journey invites readers to renew their faith in the bonds of egalitarian community forged through creative collaboration rather than through rationalized exploitation.

Goldblatt devotes a substantial portion of his book to the deliberations that led him into an early marriage and eventually also divorce, followed by much soul searching that brought forth a new and mutually fulfilling partnership forged in a common appreciation for the arts. Just when this extended section threatens reader fatigue, Goldblatt launches a new exciting chapter documenting his travels across Central America during the 1980s when many left-leaning social activists were drawn to extend their solidarity to combat the subterfuge of American foreign policy. The experience of land travel across neighboring countries only superficially bound by the Spanish language drew his attention to social circumstances where it is possible to connect beyond or outside language, as well as to dangerous situations where it remains an indispensable tool of self-preservation. Indeed, as he points out, Spanish alone proved insufficient to encompass both the many dialects and indigenous languages cohabiting on a decolonizing continent. His encounter with the political quagmire that defined Central America during the 1980s also revealed to him that sometimes the world and the local self are better served when we attend to equally urgent causes closer to home.

In the final chapters of his book, Goldblatt shines forth as a humanist who has chosen to embrace the journey of life in all its complexity and to assist others coming to creative consciousness through literacy, through synergistic articulation of a self in common cause with others. As the title of his book implies, writing carves out a space with both figurative and material dimensions, becoming the place where we live—home. If his closing chapter modulates rather abruptly from the era of his 30s into a contemporary self-reflection on the value of literacy in relation to the projects he has advanced in the city of Philadelphia, it is nevertheless a welcome and refreshing plaidoyer amidst academic budget cuts and the privatization of the commons. *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography* will prove invaluable for any secondary teacher or professor of writing seeking a useful model for preparing their own literacy autobiography or for encouraging their students to write self-reflexively of what Goldblatt, himself, refers to as "that intimate and public drama I experienced as literacy" (p. 254).