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Together, Apart. A Review of On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss, Edited by Jonathan Wyatt and Tony E. Adams

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Abstract

In this essay, I offer a review of the book, *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*, edited by Jonathan Wyatt and Tony E. Adams. An important contribution to the field of autoethnography, this book will appeal not only to scholars of family and of qualitative inquiry, but also to people struggling to find meaning in the crazy complexities of family relationships.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Family, Writing

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Together, Apart. A Review of *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*, Edited by Jonathan Wyatt and Tony E. Adams

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Late September, 2014, my grandmother died. A second mother to me, her absence is a physical thing, palpable, an ever-present missing. Serendipitously, *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*, edited by Jonathan Wyatt and Tony E. Adams (2014), ended up in my mailbox. I read the title and thought I'd find some connection to help me through my own grief. I was correct.

I enjoy reading personal narrative of family, and *On (Writing) Families* does not disappoint. The chapters are honest (sometimes painfully so) and avoid the schmaltzy turn these sort of narratives can sometimes take. Indeed, this diverse, multi-layered set of writing hangs together beautifully, exploring the connections, entanglements, and spaces between these assemblages we call family.

The reader will not find tidy, happy endings. Nothing is pat or contrived here. As the editors note in the introduction: "The chapters show...what parents, children, and families can mean, not in any sentimental sense, but rather how they matter even if we wish they didn't" (p. 3). These are truly ethnographies that break your heart (Behar, 1996), but don't leave you broken.

Each chapter is a slice of family life, from a variety of perspectives and with a variety of writing styles. Throughout I found myself alive in the writing. Riding in the car with Patricia Leavy and her daughter, singing along to Katy Perry, contemplating how to balance feminism, pop culture, and raising a daughter. With Desirée Rowes, feeling the pain of a child who believes her name is misspelled in her father's tattoo (is it? And if so, what does that mean?). Sitting alongside of Anne Harris on her biological mother's front porch, being ghosts, queering autoethnography, queering adoption.

Through an autoethnographic approach, these authors turn a scholarly lens onto their own experiences of family. Via careful analysis, creative nonfiction elements are tied to the insights offered by qualitative inquiry. As the editor's note, "Autoethnographers try to balance methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity, and they write with an attention toward improving personal/social life" (p 5). This collection accomplishes this mission exceedingly well, and instructors will find the chapters useful as exemplary illustrations of the craft. After all, what better data than our own lived experiences? As Rowes writes in her chapter, "Roses and Grime: Tattoos, Texts, and Failure,":

It is important that I attempt to mark the familial entanglements between my father and me as entanglements that I am trying to write through. The polysemic nature of Al's signifying tattoo is my focus and the (mis)spelling of

my name on my own father's bicep helps me to trouble the false narrative of generational continuity that goes (mostly) unspoken within our lives. (p. 39)

This is not just life, but an examined life, with sharable insight.

As another example, consider the wisdom in Stacy Holman Jones' "Always Strange: Transforming Loss," in which she writes:

I think now about how loss hits us in waves. From our earliest moments we are taught to begin each endeavor, including grieving, with an aim, a project, a plan, what we don't teach ourselves, or others, is how easily these aims, projects, and plans can change, evaporate, and create a suddenly present absence. How easily we are frustrated, felled. How we are suddenly exhausted but don't know why. (p. 18)

While a variety of family dynamics are considered, many of the chapters explore relationships with parents, and fathers figure prominently in the writings.

This book will appeal to academics studying family from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, as well as scholars of qualitative inquiry. Perhaps more importantly though, it will appeal to people like me -- people seeking connection in the fuzzy complexity of family intimacies, in love and in loss.

References

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Author Note

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