

Neilsen, L. (1989). *Literacy and living: The literate lives of three adults*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 150 pp. \$14.95 U.S. (softcover).

*Literacy and Living* is an ethnographic study of the literate lives of three adults who live in Hubbards, Nova Scotia. The book, which is the outgrowth of Neilsen's doctoral dissertation, examines the literacy behaviors of two women and one man. Their literacy development represents an upward progression in that all three individuals, despite the diversity of their respective backgrounds, emerge as adults whose lives are rich in literacy events. In this respect, each case study is a testimony to the value of being interested and curious and, in conjunct, reading widely and writing well. Neilsen's summary of Judy's literacy conveys, in part, the approach taken by this book towards literacy:

To maintain the life she has chosen, therefore, Judy is literate. What reading and writing she does is accomplished with relative ease. She is able to communicate information to others in writing with no difficulty. (p. 51)

Within this compact book, one discovers the basic tenets of the adult literacy enterprise. Lorri Neilsen has somehow managed to "get inside" the lives of these three individuals and what is even more remarkable is that she has managed this feat despite the fact that these are people who live in her community and with whom she shares close contact on a daily basis. One would naturally assume, therefore, that hers would represent a biased, internal account, one that lacks objectivity and rigor. In *Literacy and Living*, however, this is just not the case. Despite the closeness of her relationships with Judy, Jim, and Elizabeth, one gets the sense that she has somehow managed to see these three through the eyes of the "complete participant," recommended by Hammersley and Atkinson without the secrecy and deception that characterizes this line of research. Indeed, one of the strengths of the book is the sense in which the writer has projected a "lived through" experience in her writing not unlike that which Louise Rosenblatt talks about when she refers to reading and writing as an "aesthetic" experience. The style of writing, especially chapters two through six, is full and complete. There is a richness in the description of Hubbards and the lives of the three subjects. To illustrate, let me quote from Chapter Two:

In the open now, I see the beach. The sun is hot and the coastline across the bay at Peggy's Cove looks powder blue. The beach is empty of people: the only sound is the water rustling on the sand as the tide moves out. I look forward to this part of the run, for the water, like the sky, has a different mood every day. Since we moved here, I have begun to learn to read the ocean the way one learns to read the sky. (p. 15)

This quote, I believe, captures the flavor of the writing in the book. There are, however, some examples where this style of writing is replaced by a more formal and academic prose. Chapter One is full of examples which read more

like a doctoral dissertation than a treatise on literacy development among the adult population of Hubbards:

The field of semiotics, more than any other, has informed my perspective on literacy and learning. I take from semiotics the most simple idea: as human beings with intention, we receive and create signs that embody meaning from the world around us. (p. 7).

Work by Kohlberg (1969), Loevinger (1976), and Perry (1970) shows moral and ego development as a movement from simple, egocentric perceptions of self and the world (a we/they duality) toward an understanding of relativity, multiple perspectives on reality, and contextually tied values, understandings, and decision making. (p. 9)

While these and other similar comments are instructive and provide the necessary support from the research literature for her more literate comments, an unevenness is created in which you have the ethnographic account in apparent contrast to semiotic accounts of literacy evident in the text. More importantly, and it is at this point where I find the book to be the weakest, the author has not convincingly demonstrated that what has emerged from her data is of great significance. For example, she argues that, "Literate behavior is a process of making meaning, through signs that inform and shape the individual and the context" (p. 135). This finding, in my view, seems to reflect something about the process of literacy development that we have known for some time, particularly if we accept the semiotic picture of things. Moreover, what follows represents a set of propositions (p. 136) suggesting how schools might shift their perspective to make schooling less an institution and more a place where one adapts teaching to deal with the demands of the new literacy. Here, one gets the impression that schools need to become training centers for the market place, although I am certain that this was not the author's intention.

While the book lacks the depth of other texts dealing with the same topic, this is hardly surprising. I still feel that this is a very well-written book. What *Literacy and Living* has to say may well be the direction literacy instruction will take in the next decade, like it or not. For the author, it represents the beginning of what promises to be a very productive career.

George Labercane  
University of Calgary

Boberg, A.L. (Ed.). (1988). *Exploring the teaching milieu*. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 160 pp., \$17.95 (softcover).

This book is a collection of 11 essays intended primarily for undergraduates in teacher education. The collection is meant to provide beginning students of