

Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research, edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Peter N. Goggin. Logan: Utah State UP, 2018. 300 pp.

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In first-year writing courses, I am often asked whether or not using first person pronouns are allowed. Behind this question are usually years of strict writing rules that forbid using “I” in academic writing. Instead of providing a simple answer to the question, I respond that it depends on the rhetorical situation. If there is an important reason to include yourself in the discourse—e.g., oral histories and personal essays—then using “I” makes perfect sense. Although Maureen Daly Goggin and Peter N. Goggin’s edited anthology *Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacy Research* is a collection centered on the concept of serendipity in research, its main take-away is how integral the personal is in the writing process. Offering a variety of essays that examine how chance encounters and the unpredictable affect our academic research and writing, Goggin and Goggin’s collection “restores the human element of storytelling about adventures in the making, unmaking, and dissemination of knowledge” (7). The collection forwards serendipity “as an unexpected rupture, and opportunity, fortunate circumstances, and discoveries,” and each of the essays within explores how personal the performances of research can be (4).

Serendipity’s first section, Intersections of Personal and Political, delves into the ways the process of research is often interwoven into our own lives. In Shirley E. Faulkner-Springfield’s “‘Oh, My God! He Was a Slave!’ Secrets of a Virginia Courthouse Archive,” the author shares how her archival research revealed that her great-great-grandfather had been “a resilient survivor of . . . [the] narrative of slavery” (26). By sharing her experience of research, Faulkner-Springfield’s essay offers a “reinscribed,” not revisionist, account of life writing and the history of race in America (26). Doreen Piano’s “Making Sense of Disaster: Composing a Methodology of Place-Based Visual Research” locates herself in the midst of the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Having moved to New Orleans three weeks before the storm, Piano’s serendipitous timing “allowed [her] to rethink [her] connection to place and to others, often strangers, who had similar experiences” (39). Just as the rhetorical concept of *kairos* refers to opportunity of both time and place, Piano “make[s] the case for place as significant to the *where* and not just the *when* of serendipity” (29). Finally, in Gale Coskan-Johnson’s “Death, Dying, and Serendipity,” the author shares a constellation of personal and global events, such as 9/11 and the killing of

Osama bin Laden, to show how “disruption, frustration, and new connections” often serendipitously reveal new research trajectories (54).

Section two continues a focus on the personal in research and reminds us to keep our minds open and flexible. Lynèe Lewis Gaillet’s essay argues that we need to prepare ourselves for serendipitous moments “by faithfully following our own interests and curiosity, working together, and keeping an open mind” (68). Caren Wakerman Converse shares an experience of revisiting personal experiences later with academic rigor and grounding; drawing from her experience as a former probation officer in her rhetorical analyses of pre-sentence investigation reports, Converse’s narrative suggests the value of personal experience as a source of knowledge in the research process. Liz Rohan’s “Echoes in the Archives” documents a journey researching the Northwestern University Settlement, where a chance detour to the Harriet Vittum Park revealed the limitations of archival work. Rohan’s attention to the agency of archives, especially as it constructs the lives and legacies of women, reminds us of the tenuous existence of underrepresented people in history; “individual legacies can simply be lost to history because of scant records,” and, unfortunately, sometimes luck and happenstance is needed for these narratives to reemerge (90). Kim Donehower wraps up the section with “Serendipity and Memory: The Value of Participant Observation,” arguing that “vivid sensory impressions . . . melded with the emotions involved in participation may help certain memories more firmly take root” (98). As the *Serendipity* editors assert in their introduction, “chance favors only the prepared mind,” and the four scholars in section two show us that a prepared mind is flexible, personal, traveled, and passionate (4).

The third section of the anthology, *Stumbling into the Unknown*, offers four narratives that explore how reality can be stranger than fiction, at least in the research process. From Maureen Daly Goggin’s what-ifs that shine in her remembering of “her field research in churchyards, post offices, pubs, and museums in the English countryside” to Ryan Skinnell’s serendipitous dissertation research process and Daniel Wuebben’s searching for a missing Nikola Tesla street sign, the authors in section three share their personal essays to provide insight and commentary on the research (10). Peter N. Goggin’s “The Art of the ‘Accident’: Serendipity in Field Research” reminds us that “serendipity is generally not one momentous happenstance but an accumulation of discoveries and events that emerge from purposeful exploration” (130). As random as research opportunities may seem, they are usually the culmination of a lot of disparate work, and Goggin does an excellent job of reminding readers not to get too carried away with the wonder that serendipity can seem to evoke; much of serendipity’s existence relies on the work we have already done.

Having established the beneficial nature of being flexible and having an open mind to chance encounters in the research process, the collection moves on in section four to insist that researchers anticipate serendipity in their studies and discovery. In “Prepare to Be Surprised,” Lori Ostergaard suggests having a flexible research agenda, a methodical approach that exhausts internet searches and library databases, and an organized approach to keep archival materials in their own catalogued contexts. Patty Wilde’s “Playing the Name Game” reminds us that small differences in searches can yield quite different results. For example, while researching Loreta Janeta Velazquez, a Cuban-born woman who posed as a male Confederate soldier, Wilde discovered Velazquez’s alias, Harry T. Buford; different spellings of her name like Madame L. J. Velasquez; and married names such as L. J. Velasquez Beard. Lynn Z. Bloom’s “The Sunshine of Serendipity” shares her development of a canon of first-year writing essays, ranked by how many times individual authors were reprinted in readers spanning fifty years (from 1946-96). Bloom also shares a personal story of a student’s serendipitous writing process of an honors project. In all, the essays in this fourth section exemplify how to use and account for serendipity in research and teaching.

Trusting the Process, the last section in the anthology, points out that serendipity does not always provide a nice eureka moment. Bill Endres, in “The Ethics of Serendipity,” notes that serendipitous moments can sometimes arise from calamity or trauma, and that scholars need to consider ethical ramifications, especially for opportunities that are rare or fleeting (222). Brad Gyori argues that the unstable and unsettled aspects of postmodern rhetorical constructions—like remix, reboot, and deconstruction—are what become “legitimate process[es] of discovery” (245). Instead of having researchers focus “primarily on evidence that supports their argument du jour,” disjunctive strategies like remixing and rebooting allow for chance and serendipity “to complicate and even confound the intuitions undergirding their proposed agendas” (244-5). Finally, for Zachary Beare, mischance can be just as productive as chance. In “The Strange Practices of Serendipitous Failure,” Beare reinterprets the rhetorical concept of *metanoia* as missed opportunities, arguing that such a binary of *kairos*, or opportunity, deserves its own rhetorical consideration.

Although the collection’s intentions are situated in research, readers who teach might be interested in more consideration of how to implement serendipity, conceptually or practically, into composition praxis. Some essays, like Bloom’s, addresses serendipity in classroom narratives, but students can benefit from understanding how chance encounters and opportunities may shape their own research and writing. For instance, before embarking on research papers, I assign annotated bibliographies in first-year writing classes; however, instead of asking students to develop a strong research question upfront, I encourage

them to jump directly into their research. I want students to understand that it is okay not to know exactly where research will take them. While *Serendipity*'s authors clearly agree with me in principle, I would have liked to see more examples of implementing concepts of *kairos*, as well as *metanoia*, for the writing classroom.

Yet, *Serendipity* is still a worthwhile read for teachers and researchers alike, particularly because of the theme of love—the love of learning and research, the love for our communities and personal histories—that threads through the many stories the contributors share with readers. Love is universal, and yet love is also personal, a duality of which the writers and editors continue to remind us. *Serendipity* reminds us that despite the tumultuous times in which we currently live and the “emboldened volatile discourses of intolerance and hatred” that feel rampant, compassion and open-mindedness, whether in research or in life, can keep us all positively invested in the worlds in which we live (12).

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