

Whatever Gets You Through the Night: Poetry, Prose, and Healing from PTSD

Annotated Bibliography for 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

Prof. Kristin G. Kelly
University of North Georgia

Bate, Jonathan, and Andrew Schuman. "Books Do Furnish a Mind: The Art and Science of Bibliotherapy." *Lancet*. Vol. 387. Issue 10020. 26 February 2016. 742-743.

This article traces the history of bibliotherapy as a tool for those suffering bouts of depression and anxiety. The authors remind readers that the term was first coined in a 1916 essay entitled "A Literary Clinic" and that libraries were at the heart of military hospitals in WWI. More obscure historical information is provided as well: "An Oxford University don, HF Brett-Smith, who had been exempted from military service on medical grounds, was tasked by the British Army with drawing up a 'Fever Chart' ranking the most 'salubrious reading for the wounded. Jane Austen came top."

Hynes and Hynes-Berry. *Biblio/Poetry Therapy: The Interactive Process*. 1994.

The essence of the work of Hynes and Hynes-Berry is recognizing the value of poetry and prose in healing, for reading can be done in absolute solitude yet bring about fierce community and a sense of loyalty. One soul reading one book provides community with the author, his or her various characters, and the reader. Two or more souls reading a book of prose or poetry together brings about a solid bond of shared interests and sometimes trust. The article draws on the work of Ibrahim and Varon, who note that reading iambic pentameter may be especially healing, for iambic pentameter mimics the rhythm of the human heartbeat.

Mena, Gerardo. "So I Was a Coffin." October 25, 2010. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/IdYJuY0ZRjU>.

Mena's combination of music, photography, and spoken word poetry exemplifies the benefit of art in creating community and bearing witness. As Mena remembers his fellow warriors in 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, he pushes back against loss by making art. He dives through deep loss in producing this art piece. At first, he was told to be a spear in Iraq, yet he feels completely defeated because all he succeeded in producing was "a city of bodies" packaged in rows, all death, all destruction. So he tried to be a flag, very patriotic and true. Yet somehow, he was a bad flag too. Ultimately, he tried to be a bandage and save his dear friend Cpl. Kyle Powell, but he could not. So now he is a coffin, a vessel holding his dead forever. The artist communicates a sense of defeat in narrating his journey to become a coffin, yet there is an equally strong sense of triumph in telling the story of beloved friends through fine art.

Morris, David J. *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

This book is the most rigorous analysis of PTSD research to date. The author uses his own experience with PTSD to propel himself through university stacks and the heart of the VA system. He never allows easy answers to how to mitigate the pain of PTSD although he does privilege English literature over prolonged exposure therapy. The author's journalism is ruthlessly true, and so are the conclusions in this compendium of research.

Eds. Hansel, Sarah, Ann Steidle, Grace Zaczek, and Ron Zaczek (USMC). *Soldier's Heart: Survivors' Views of Combat Trauma*. Lutherville: Sidran, 1995.

This volume includes a wealth of poetry by Vietnam vets, much of it written decades after the war. Most of the pieces are short and accessible enough to be discussed in a variety of settings—from college

classroom to community rooms. The themes of the works vary as well, from enduring gratitude to forever bitterness. One representative poem entitled "Animals Are Better Than People" by Kellan Kylo (USMC, HMM-162, Ky Ha, Marble Mountain, Quang Tri, Vietnam 1966-1968) speaks quietly and hauntingly about coming home from the Vietnam War: "His dog/looked at him with eyes/of love,/when/the whole country did not."

Powers, Kevin. *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. New York: Little, Brown, 2014.

This collection of poetry by the author of *The Yellow Birds* renders the specific sweetness and brutality of war. The title poem compares the sweetness of love to the pleasurable sensation of not killing. Other poems describe the hard work of digging one's heels in to survive. Still other poems, painted with pink splotches, capture pure anger and forever grief: "I want the boys at the end of the bar / to know, these Young Republicans, in pink popped-collar shirts, to know / that laughter drives me mad."

Turner, Brian. *Phantom Noise*. Farmington: Alice James, 2010.

As Brian Turner's debut book of poetry *Here, Bullet* crystallized the combat soldier's experience in Iraq, *Phantom Noise* witnesses the wreck of homecoming. The poems in this collection conjure the eeriness of homecoming: the unreality of suburbia (see "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center") and the deep mourning of the dead ("Illumination Rounds"). This collection animates the Iraqi dead so that their stories live on.