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Book review: "Writing Away the Demons: Stories of Creative Coping Through Transformative Writing"

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Writing Away the Demons: Stories of Creative Coping Through Transformative Writing. Edited with an introduction by Sherry Reiter, and a forward by David Read Johnson. St. Cloud, MN.: Northstar Press, 2009, 304 pp., paperback, \$14.95.

Part collection of personal essays, part transformative writing guide, part study of what it means to find voice and vision in troubled times, and all wise, *Writing Across the Demons: Stories of Creative Coping Through Transformative Writing*, edited by Sherry Reiter, offers all who use the power of the word for individual and social change deep inspiration and instruction. This unusual and powerful book truly brings together life-giving stories, each one unfolding the story behind the story of using writing to survive and thrive through cancer, domestic abuse, depression, grief and other moments when we stand on the bridge between the life we knew and the new life facing us.

Reiter -- a poetry therapy pioneer, poetry therapist, drama therapist, founder of the Creative "Righting" Center, and member of NAPT and the Transformative Language Arts Network -- draws on decades of experience in naming the common threads of how transformative writing transforms. "The Ten Principles of Transformative Writing," which she contributed, is a must-read for any poetry therapist, certified applied poetry facilitator, and transformative language artist because of the clarity, depth and concision she lends to naming how our words can create change. Defining transformative writing as "...the intentional use of writing for psychological change and well-being" (p. 3), Reiter goes on to name the ten principles as mastery, ritual, safety, witnessing, freedom/poetic license, venting and containment, the magic of the poetic, creativity, integrating parts into a whole, and transformation of time, space and matter. In her explanations of each principle, she offers lucid writing, potent examples and relevant resource, telling us, for example, when discussing "integrating parts into a whole," how the meaning of the word, "therapy," comes from the Greek to connote what Christina Baldin describes as stretching one's consciousness (p. 3).

Reiter's important insights focus on all that is necessary for writing to heal and not to harm, and

for writers, artists, therapists and counselors to facilitate with an eye toward creating a safe space where witnessing can take place. These insights lay the foundation for all the essays that follow, each one exploring a different life challenge.

All the stories -- personal essays infused with examples of the author writing his/her way toward greater health and balance -- are moving and pertinent, and like the best myths, movies and tales, these essays teach by example, metaphor and the magic of language. In Alysa Cummings' "Greetings from CancerLand," the author shares her journal through her ordeal of breast cancer, telling us at the onset that she has named her cancer "Boris," and while Boris is trying to kill her, she is determined to stay alive. In this personification -- the name taken from Brodis Badunov of Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoons -- Cummings found the language to cultivate greater strength and determination: "Writing about Boris and plotting his imminent demise helped me wrestle with my first real demon -- that I had no control" (p. 74).

Barbara Bethea's "The Woman Who Changed a Triangle into a Circle" conveys the importance of domestic abuse victims to create circles of support through writing and community as a means toward transforming themselves into survivors. Drawing on her church and the sacred space of writing in her journal, Bethea shines the light "...on a path of discovery and recovery" (p. 179).

In Leah Tamar's "The Journal That Was a Reservoir," the author unfolds the often-hidden and silenced dimensions of growing old in a culture obsessed with the young. Her poetry, which is sprinkled throughout her essays, celebrates the poetic in the prosaic, such as her "Ode to the People of Ocean View Senior Living," in which she writes:

They cry out about the elevator on their way to dinner

But they are really crying

for a connection to Life

that is meaningful. (p. 238)

In the summary by Reiter at the end of this essay (and at the end of each essay), Reiter says, "Leah is

standing at the top of the mountain after climbing for many years. It is a unique vantage point from which to survey one's life" (p. 253).

In Reiter's conclusion, she points toward the old Yiddish saying that God created humans because he loves a good story, and goes on to write a challenge to readers to pick up their own pens, and find the creative courage to use story -- and transformative writing in general -- to imbue their lives and communities with greater meaning.

Reiter's book altogether is not just a must-read for many, but an important contribution to poetry literature through its form as well as content. By presenting this anthology of writing away the life demons that face all of us at one point or another, Reiter illustrates the importance of inviting others to share their stories. Such an approach enhances the credibility, applicability and sheer wisdom of each issue this book examines. As David Read Johnson writes in the forward, "Throughout, one feels the power of transformative writing in altering people's relationship to their own history" (p. xiv).

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