

## Review Essay:

**Paula Caplan. *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans***

**David Chrisinger. *See Me For Who I Am: Student Veterans' Stories of War and Coming Home***

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Veterans are cast into two roles in American public discourse: Hero (Hawrot Weigel and Detweiler Miller) and Threat (also called Rambo (Schell & Kleinbart, Valentino); Ticking Time Bomb (Hawrot Weigel and Detweiler Miller, Wood); and Victim (Katopes) among others). Only half of one percent of Americans serve on active duty, so the gap between military and civilians is wide. In their books, Paula Caplan and David Chrisinger disrupt and nuance rhetorical constructions of veterans through radical reframing of PTSD and trauma.

On first look, Caplan, a Harvard psychologist and the student veterans at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, who Chrisinger highlights, seem to have relatively little in common; the authors belong to different generations and intellectual traditions. Despite their differences, these books enrich one another. *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans* and *See Me For Who I Am: Student Veterans' Stories of War and Coming Home* both challenge readers,

disrupt the limiting narratives available to veterans, and replace them with fuller stories. Caplan encourages people to listen to veterans' stories, and the twenty student veteran essayists in Chrisinger's text give citizens a way to hear first-person stories about military service, transition, and reintegration into American society. This student writing may be particularly compelling for teachers wondering who student veterans are or for community learning contexts.

Paula Caplan asks 'what is a sane reaction to war?' and cautions: "We need to think long and hard about where to draw the line between a normal, understandable response to war and one that is otherwise" (Caplan 21). Pathologizing and labelling intense reactions to war mental illness (as in the case of PTSD) allows civilians to distance themselves from war and to deflect responsibility to trained professionals. She argues that ordinary citizens can help veterans by listening and engaging with their stories and advocates for compassionate engagement. She provides suggestions for ways to listen with respect.

Caplan claims that listening can communicate respect, belonging, and healing compassion. Each person tells their own life story, to themselves and others, and sharing the story increases a sense of value and being seen. Caplan argues that non-therapists can help veterans by listening without judging, advising, or rushing the speaker.

Caplan explores problems veterans face. Instead of the tragic but familiar litany of homelessness, addiction, and unemployment, Caplan discusses eight common consequences of war: trauma, grief and sadness, fear and anxiety, guilt and shame, rage, conflicts of values and crises of meaning, betrayal and mistrust, and isolation, alienation and numbing. Those consequences resonate within the pages of *See Me For Who I Am*. Given Caplan's focus on responses to trauma and war, she does not explicitly discuss benefits and strengths resulting from military service. In addition to trauma, I show that the student veteran authors testify to the value of their maturity, mindfulness, resilience, teamwork, and altruism, among other traits.

## TRAUMA

Caplan defines trauma as something unbearable, which varies based on factors including personal history, coping strategies, the nature of the event(s), expectations and resources available to people in the environment (35). Some sources of trauma associated with the military are witnessing or causing death and destruction, losing faith in the government that committed to the war, uncovering lies or deception, friendly fire, learning that unnecessary risks were taken, and sexual harassment and assault (Caplan 35–40).

Travis Jochimsen writes about “Sharing the Cost of War.” His uncle survived Vietnam and does not speak about his experiences there. Jochimsen respects his uncle but chose to tell his story to an artist who created art based on his story. Jochimsen concludes:

I saw firsthand what ‘bottling it up’ can do to a person. .... Maybe that old stigma that tells a man he can’t talk about his feelings is gone in today’s culture—maybe it’s not. I believe that if sharing your experiences can somehow help you move past the costs of going to war for your country, you should do it (82–3).

This praise of storytelling illustrates the philosophy linking Caplan and Chrisinger—if telling veterans’ story can help, then we should listen. However, chosen silences should also be respected.<sup>1</sup>

## GRIEF AND SADNESS

Caplan discusses grief for fallen comrades, which is more developed in the section on guilt. She also acknowledges that home often fails to live up to fantasies created during deployments. Disillusionment with home occurs in at least four narratives. Three authors claim that they weren’t fully home when they returned to the US from deployment (Makuski, Pozolinski, Ruesh). Cody Makuski reveals “halfway through the deployment, I wanted nothing more than to be at home, safe and sound in my barracks room with a case of beer and a relaxing song on the stereo ... But when I got home, I really wasn’t ‘home’” (127).

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1 Roger Thompson wrote about respecting veterans’ choices to be silent in “Recognizing Silence: Composition, Writing, and the Ethical Space for War”

Matt Fortun experienced sharp homesickness during his service and deployment, which took him far away from Wisconsin. Each homecoming was a little bit less enthusiastic. He tries to gloss over his hurt, but wonders: "Although I never saw any combat during my deployment, how could my friends and family have been so sure I would return home at all?" (Fortun 98). Fortun's question reveals the awareness of danger and anxiety he experiences about deploying to a war zone.

## **FEAR AND ANXIETY**

Caplan identifies disagreements with people who hold your life in their hands as a source of anxiety. A few of the student veteran authors allude to conflict with specific individuals but overall the authors highlight comrades to praise them. Caplan also discusses the hypermasculine culture of the military as a source of anxiety. Caplan wrote her book before the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and she included fear of discrimination as a particular anxiety for LGBT veterans. None of the authors disclose LGBT identity in their essays, but several of the young men speak about military service as a way of testing and proving their manhood. Zachary Ruesch reflects: "a part of me wanted to be tested by the experience of violence in combat" (142). After homecoming, Ruesch experienced anxiety. Despite reluctance to appear weak, he approached professors when he experienced difficulties and found that they "helped me to improvise, adapt, and overcome" (147). I hope many students follow Ruesch's example to communicate with faculty and join peer communities to meet their learning needs.

## **GUILT AND SHAME**

Caplan explains the presence of survivor guilt, the feeling that something is wrong because others died and the survivor lived. Chase Vuchetich recounts survivor guilt in a haunting essay. His battalion suffered heavy casualties in Sangin, Afghanistan. The question of why Vuchetich survived haunted him; he abused alcohol for a time, but reports that his drinking is under control. Substance abuse as a coping mechanism is a common thread for those who survived trauma (including Coward and Ruesch). There are no easy answers for grief and guilt after death and injury, but refusing to listen to

these stories or invalidating a veterans' feelings with words like "you shouldn't feel guilty" shuts down the conversation and possibility of understanding. When confidences are misunderstood or sacrifices are denigrated, some veterans report flares of anger.

## RAGE

Caplan argues: "Rage is a common feeling for veterans—rage about their own helplessness or powerlessness to have made things turn out better, rage about lies they were told ... rage about feeling disconnected from loved ones when they come home, rage at how things had changed" (Caplan 48). However, she categorizes rage as a secondary emotion, which defends the psyche from intolerable emotions like fear, shame, guilt, helplessness or hopelessness (49). Rage is the least emphasized by the student veteran authors. But Aaron Lewis, who spoke about living with terror and vigilance, acknowledges anger and its connection to other emotions: "When veterans come home from war, though, they may fear what all the anger, violence, and danger have done to them. I know I do" (149).

## CONFLICTS OF VALUES AND CRISES OF MEANING<sup>2</sup>

Conflicts of values arise often from situations when the enemy looks like civilians, and the veteran is plagued by ethical choices they make or by situations that compromise their values. Yvette M. Pino, one of two female contributors, recounts how her journey from ignorance to understanding about Iraq and her empathy for the people in Iraq who lost their homes, worked for low wages, persevered despite corruption, endured frequent raids, and hope to give their children better lives. Pino's perspective is unique for this collection. She earned a BFA and founded the Veteran Print Project, an organization that pairs artists and veterans; veterans tell their stories and artists creatively interpret the stories. This listening and sharing answers Caplan's calls to listen to veterans and make their stories more widely known in a different medium.

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2 For a fuller exploration of dimensions of a crisis of meaning, readers might consult *Beyond Duty: Life on the Frontline in Iraq* by Shannon Meehan and Roger Thompson, a memoir about a decision Meehan made that led to civilian deaths and the psychological effects of the tragedy.

## BETRAYAL AND MISTRUST

Feeling that the government, recruiter, or leaders have lied or misled a veteran, can lead to a sense of betrayal and mistrust. Kyle Nowak broadened my tacit understanding of the dangers of war by historicizing how deadly disease has been when compared to direct combat fatalities. Nowak's essay recounts his experience of Gulf War Syndrome; he lost 85 pounds in 8 weeks and experiences pain and exhaustion. Nowak felt that he was unjustly treated like a "malingerer," although he always gave his best to the Army. The sense of betrayal is palpable: "The day I was discharged, I threw all my uniforms, medals, awards and anything military-related in a dumpster on the base. ... I do not think I will ever be a fan of the military again" (112). Nowak explains that he wrote his essay because he needed to tell his story and wanted to raise awareness about severe illnesses affecting veterans.

## ISOLATION, ALIENATION, AND NUMBING

Caplan explains that sometimes veterans find their experiences unspeakable. They try to protect loved ones with silence, which can lead to a sense that they are separate and impossible to understand. Tyler Pozolinski's sparse assonance opens: "Alone. Alienated. Abandoned" (102). He describes recurring nightmares and the perpetual question "Who have I become?" (103).

Sara Poquette, a female veteran, puts gender on the table with "Earning a Seat at the Table." Her service has been discounted and devalued. When she experienced numbness, hypervigilance, and panic attacks after mortar attacks and an IED, she asked a health care provider if she might have PTSD, but the woman laughed and told Poquette only men who saw combat have PTSD. The health care provider did not listen or respect Poquette's honesty and experience because it broke her expectations; I hope those who read Caplan's and Chrisinger's books are better listeners. Poquette includes her story to educate readers about women's contributions and presence in the armed forces. Poquette's essay is one of two by female veterans. The inclusion of additional female student veterans would enhance this collection.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq is a good collection of writing by female military-affiliated writers, but the contributors do not share much about the experiences of female student veterans.

## STRENGTHS

Geoffrey Norfleet's essay "See Me For Who I Am" gave the book its title; he challenges and invites readers to release biases to know him. Norfleet shares that most civilians who learn of his military service want to know if he killed anyone; he wants them to ask anything except that "narrow-minded and ignorant" question (37). The other common civilian response to veterans is "thank you for your service." This phrase has become a platitude.<sup>4</sup> Leon Valliere and Zach Trzinski each share experiences with that exchange. Valliere's story about traveling in uniform for Independence Day shows absurdities of being venerated as a hero, and Trzinski educates readers about some of the different jobs service members do; he wants people to meet individual veterans and thank them for the right reasons.

If I were planning a service learning course or community writing group for veterans, I would share these articles with facilitators, because they break the habit of expecting to find pain or trauma in veterans' stories and remind us of the variety of experiences student veterans possess.

Other essays in Chrisinger's collection illuminate positive facets of veterans' experiences. Ryan Callahan celebrates the maturity and perspective he developed from a decade in the Army. Sean Casey praises his mentors, who helped him grow into a leader. John Elbert chronicles the history of veterans' transitions to civilian life over the last hundred years and suggests that resilience can be developed and learned. Maturity, leadership, resilience—student veterans possess and develop these traits and more.

Josh Thunder, Ross Petersen, and Brett Foley talk about rituals and altruism that might change how we think about veterans. Thunder shares the rituals he has crafted for practicing mindfulness, which bring him peace. Petersen explains how he became a bone marrow donor and saved a life. He concludes "I bet my story probably isn't what you'd expect to hear from a veteran" (63). That surprise exposes how narrowly veterans' stories are constructed.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Samet's op-ed about "Thank you for your service" is worth reading.

Finally, Foley recounts running a 50 mile ultramarathon in 11 hours with Chrisinger to raise money for a nonprofit “The Mission Continues” that supports veteran transitions to civilian life. Foley’s account of suffering with a friend for a good cause, physical and mental exertion in adverse conditions, support from family and friends, persistence on a long and challenging journey and ultimately savoring victory serves as an apt metaphor for veterans’ experiences in transitioning back to civilian life. The road can be long and hard, but companions like teachers, friends, and mentors can help reach goals that seem otherwise impossible. With guides like Caplan, Chrisinger, and the student veteran authors, we are ready to travel away from the limitations of the hero/threat binary.

Caplan and Chrisinger’s reframing of veterans’ experiences will interest people who work with public rhetoric and arguments of definition. The books are a valuable resource for *Reflections* readers who are developing service learning projects and courses around veterans’ writing or oral history. The books serve as resources to scaffold discussions of the ethical and political implications of work with students, veterans, facilitators, and community stakeholders. Their books are both thought provoking and accessible. I hope that Caplan and Chrisinger succeed in calling more Americans to listen to veterans.



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