

Review:

Lovella Calica and Kevin Basl (Eds).

***Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing
& Artwork By Veterans***

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Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing & Artwork By Veterans offers a voice for soldiers speaking their truths and a rare glimpse inside their hearts and minds for the civilians who remain homeside, creating an open channel to the lesser known, (and rarely discussed), personal details of warfare through poetry, creative nonfiction, and photography. Editors Lovella Calica and Kevin Basl are helping warrior writers conquer the divide between the public sphere and veteran experience, (from Vietnam to Afghanistan), one line at a time.

The concept of warrior poetry isn't a new one. War has long inspired prose. Since the Iliad, one of the oldest poems in the Western world, the voices of soldiers have led battles both on the field of warfare and on the rocky terrain of creative writing and poetry. What makes this collection different? The works included in *Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing & Artwork By Veterans* were written by veterans working through their experiences in a

workshop led by a non-federally funded veteran support group called 'Warrior Writers'.

Photographer Greg Broseus poignantly summarizes his collection titled, 'Re-Deployment,' as well as the entire anthology, by stating: "I believe there is a barrier between soldiers and the civilian population that leads to misunderstandings and hinders the ability for civilians and veterans to relate their trauma to one another. My work serves as a catalyst to bridge that gap and create a dialogue of understanding" (194). On the opposite page, Broseus includes a photograph of an anguished American soldier with the barrel of a handgun in his mouth, bullets scattered on the table before him.

Within this anthology's attempt at creating a dialogue between veteran and the civilian population, some of the soldier's accounts are inspiring, while others are more far more despairing.

In Elaine Little's creative nonfiction piece, 'Kabul Dolls,' she describes her experience in Afghanistan when she sponsored a man who sold dolls handmade by Afghan women who had little to no other means of supporting themselves. The author describes her impression of Afghan women in burqas, "...it wasn't just the garb that seemed restrictive; everything a woman did seemed to be circumscribed" (60). This included their ability to obtain gainful employment after their husbands died, leaving them with nothing. Little shares the story of how she helped the man selling the beautiful dolls by assisting him in getting a vendor's license in Bagram (the base she was stationed on). The inspiring tale gives the reader a peek into Afghan life and how American soldiers stationed there interacted with them (and their culture).

In stark contrast, Alexander Feeno's free-verse letter poem, 'Sorry For Not Being Sorry,' tells a darker, more haunting tale, in which the author apologizes for not being sorry that he kicked a begging child in the chest (an unnamed child, who worked with other children to block the door of the Feeno's vehicle, whom he can't forget). He asks for the child's forgiveness, "I was an angry young man with a gun strapped to my hip. The weight of it was like a hot burning coal, stuck deep in my pocket... It burned me. In turn, I burned you... I

hope you can forgive me. Not just for my sake, but for your own... In this life, what we carry is what we give" (113).

Feeno's strength lies in his stark openness while facing an action that many would work to cover up. As he reimagines what he thought had occurred, along with what likely happened, Feeno acknowledges his mistake and reaches out to the child he injured to apologize, yet can't feel entirely sorry for what he did because he saw the child as his enemy at the time. Taking a deeper look at the work, the reader can see that this poem likely represents a transition for the soldier, who is still working to unpack his wartime actions, as well as the events that took place during his time served in the military.

One of the book's strong suits is that it offers up such honesty. It focuses on the veteran experience without judgement, both in form and topic. This collection includes well-polished gems right alongside of rough hewn fragments from budding writers and artists, giving it the sense of a genuine dialogue.

As a criticism, the flow of the anthology seems too staggered and slightly disorganized. While the editors seemingly make an attempt at starting with wartime activity as it's experienced from the beginning of a soldier's career, then wrapping up with re-deployment and PTSD experiences, it isn't sectioned out well enough for the reader to see clearly.

Overall, this collection is best enjoyed piece by piece. Readers might find that the trauma described by some authors is difficult to take in. And of course, that's the point of it. The beauty in this collection is that it's about surviving and turning pain into poetry. It's about opening doors of communication that were once closed. And although some of the works are utterly heart wrenching, the reader can't help but be pulled back in. Not just but the powerful photos and imagery presented within the collection, but also by the proverbial olive branch it extends, from its poet warriors to civilian readers.

In order for anthologies such as this one to be truly successful, it's important to remember that creating a point of dialogue for veterans

and civilians to share experiences is not a silver bullet - but a process. In *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Paula Mathieu points out:

In order to move from the category of possibility to reality... one must see utopia not as an abstraction or an idealized blueprint but as a continually open vision toward which one keeps working (18).

Using rhetoric within veteran support communities as a bright burning torch of hope with which we can empower members, is not the result of one quick action or program. Such flames begin with a spark but require time to grow strong and burn bright. This is an active process that carries an investment of time. Editors Calica and Basl demonstrate that they are indeed nurturing the torch.

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