The Art of Book Reviewing: A Case Study

If you’re new to book reviewing the genre may seem a bit daunting. If you’re a lover of books, though, and find you often have something to say in response to what you have read, book reviewing may be a great way to share your enthusiasm, heighten your own appreciation of craft, and contribute to the community as a literary citizen. Beginners may want to review the basics, as shared in “Writing a Book Review” on the Purdue Online Writing Lab: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/704/1/

For a more comprehensive look at how book reviewing works, Poets’ Quarterly editor and publisher Leslie L. Nielsen shares an annotated review of a poetry book, as reviewed by contributing editor Brian Fanelli. The sidebar comments share Leslie’s response to Brian’s review and aims to help new reviewers understand how the review works.

The original unmarked review is available online: http://www.poetsquarterly.com/2014/07/review-letter-composed-during-lull-in.html

Review by Brian Fanelli, Poets’ Quarterly Contributing Editor

Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting by Kevin Powers
Little, Brown 2014
96 pages, perfect bound
ISBN: 978-0316401081

Prior to releasing his debut poetry collection, Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting, Iraq war veteran Kevin Powers already reached literary fame through his debut novel The Yellow Birds, as a finalist for the National Book Award, winner of the Guardian First Book Award, and winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award. The novel tells the story of 21-year-old Private Bartle, who fights in Iraq alongside 18-year-old Private Murphy. The novel switches between chapters set in Iraq and chapters set in Virginia, when Bartle returns home. Powers’ debut poetry collection explores the aftermath of war and the psychological detachment that occurs, while examining the history of his home state of Virginia and the history of past wars, including World War II and the firebombing in Dresden. Like The Yellow Birds, Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting is not some sheer political statement or diatribe, but rather an honest assessment of war’s impact on the individual.

The war poems that work especially well are the ones that highlight the speaker’s relationship with other family members and the impact the Iraq war had on those relationships. In “Blue Star Mother,” Powers does a superb job capturing the anxiety a mother feels when her son ships out. He writes:

My mother told me
about a dream she had
before the sleeping stopped. I died
and woke at her bedside
to tell her I was dead,
though I would not have
had to tell her because
I’d already bled on her favorite floral rug
and half my jaw was missing.
I don’t know what to make of that.
Such precise detail, including the lines about blood on the floral rug, bring the war to life for the reader, including the daily anxiety soldiers and their loved ones face. Like other good war literature, Powers' best poems succeed a personalizing the traumatic experience.

What Powers also does well is address the difficulty of explaining the war experience to anyone who has not been there. Addressing his mother again in "A History of Yards," he writes:

I am far from her. Not hearing the mortars descending and knowing no way of explaining what it means to be mortared, I lie in a courtyard eight thousand miles distant and remember she's watching as she has been each morning since I promised not to die.

Other poems focus on the complex emotions and psychological effects war has once a soldier returns home. In "Separation," the soldier is back in Virginia, hanging out at a small bar, while Young Republicans in "pink popped-collar shirts" laugh and make fun of the veteran crying at the bar. The speaker confesses, "I want my rifle / and I want them to know / how scared I am still, alone / in these bars three years later when / I notice it is gone." The poem is especially effective at moving through a range of emotions, including anger at the laughter and sorrow because of the difficulty adjusting to civilian life post-deployment. There is even a pained longing in the poem for certain aspects of war, including the ability to hold the rifle again.

Powers' poems aren't all about his experience in Iraq. Other poems, such as "In the Ruins of the Ironworks," focus on rustbelt Virginia towns. But more often than not, the collection circles back to war, even past wars, including the poem "An Alternate History of the Destruction of Dresden by Fire," an incident made famous by Kurt Vonnegut's novel Slaughterhouse-Five. Like Vonnegut's novel, Powers' poem recounts the destruction the bombing in the German city caused, including the death of allied troops held captive. While Powers doesn't paint some gory picture, he does depict well the moment before death, just as the bombs started to fall. "Past the Ebe the sky filled with a thousand tired / boys from Richmond, boys from Birmingham, from Detroit / and York / holding their breath as the flak exploded all around and / they waited / to die."

Like The Yellow Birds, Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting is worth a re-read and another re-read. There are a few poems that show Powers still has to finesse the line break, but overall, his debut collection is a strong account of the fear, anxiety, and psychological detachment that war causes. Powers is a poet/novelist worth paying attention to for years to come.