

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.

Comment [M1]: Introduces the poet. This is especially important for a publication like *Poets' Quarterly* that wants to reach both poets and readers of poetry, but doesn't assume scholar's knowledge of contemporary writers.

Comment [M2]: Summary of historical context—neatly accomplished in one thorough sentence.

Comment [M3]: Heads off naysayers or objections to the topic, since war poetry is not entirely typical (although other poets like Tom Sleigh increasingly bring their military or combat experiences to the page as poetry)

Comment [M4]: Quick summary of thematic content, includes reviewer's assessment of the book's value to that theme.

Comment [M5]: Evaluation and highlighting of which poems in the book work best. Summarized in one sentence.

Comment [M6]: Supported immediately with a specific example including excerpted passage as illustration

Comment [M7]: It's immediately evident from the words "My mother" how the chosen example supports the reviewer's claim about family members

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 at 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.

Comment [M8]: Follow-up comment explaining which aspects of the excerpt are most notable. This particularity—the tying of all comments and evaluations very tightly to specific passages of the poems themselves—makes the difference often between a solid review and a worthlessly general one.

Comment [M9]: Reviewer indicates his familiarity with the specific sub-genre of literature where the book fits. This general statement is convincing because we've already been supplied with detailed historical and poetic knowledge. If the reviewer had only been making grand claims about humanity or war or poetry without the detailed support, we would already have lost interest in the review. In a longer review, this would have been a good place to refer to other notable examples and contextualize the poet among his peers.

Comment [M10]: Another well-supported point lauding the book's successes. These are important to a publication like *PQ* where we see our role as reviewers as one of advocacy for poets and poetry.

Comment [M11]: An apt choice of points since it likely applies to most of the publications readers as well—subtly making the point that this would be a good book for them to read.

Comment [M12]: Includes more detailed analysis.

Comment [M13]: A phenomenon currently in the news—helps to establish this book's importance.

Comment [M14]: The review itself is also well written, with numerous excellent turns of phrase.

Comment [M15]: More literary historical contextualization.

Comment [M16]: While he doesn't this...he does that. More good, clear rhetorical analysis of what the poems accomplish.

Comment [M17]: Summary of reviewer's evaluation and a recommendation.

Comment [M18]: This review concentrates on thematic elements and does so effectively and efficiently. No formal elements of the poems are analyzed, but they are not missed since the primary focus is psychological and sociological—fitting to the focus of the book itself.

Comment [M19]: Other things the review does well: Clearly communicates the importance of the book to its time (era of PTSD) and tradition (war literature); makes clear, objective judgments about the success and value of the book without reference to personal preference; no digressive sermonizing about the poet's theme, i.e. focus is on the poems, not the reviewer.