



Poetry as Survival

Gregory Orr

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Intended for general readers and for students and scholars of poetry, *Poetry as Survival* is a complex and lucid analysis of the powerful role poetry can play in confronting, surviving, and transcending pain and suffering. Gregory Orr draws from a generous array of sources. He weaves discussions of work by Keats, Dickinson, and Whitman with quotes from three-thousand-year-old Egyptian poems, Inuit songs, and Japanese love poems to show that writing personal lyric has helped poets throughout history to process emotional and experiential turmoil, from individual stress to collective grief. More specifically, he considers how the acts of writing, reading, and listening to lyric bring ordering powers to the chaos that surrounds us. Moving into more contemporary work, Orr looks at the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Stanley Kunitz, and Theodore Roethke, poets who relied on their own work to get through painful psychological experiences.

As a poet who has experienced considerable trauma--especially as a child--Orr refers to the damaging experiences of his past and to the role poetry played in his ability to recover and survive. His personal narrative makes all the more poignant and vivid Orr's claims for lyric poetry's power as a tool for healing. *Poetry as Survival* is a memorable and inspiring introduction to lyric poetry's capacity to help us find safety and comfort in a threatening world.

Poetry as Survival Details

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John Fredrickson says

This was a difficult book to read. Individual sections of it seemed to resonate and make sense, but the book as a collection of chapters did not seem to flow together. The integration of the chapters appears to be oriented around the nature or existence of suffering, seen through the individual lenses of a wide variety of poets.

Sigrun Hodne says

Somehow something has gone wrong with poetry in our culture. We have lost touch with its purpose and value, and in doing so, we have lost contact with essential aspects of our own emotional and spiritual lives.

<https://omstreifer.com/tag/gregory-orr/>

Robert says

Click here: [<http://www.robertpeake.com/archives/2...>]

Susan Schefflein says

Excellent look at poetry as response to trauma. Could have been better edited. Some very worthwhile thoughts/ideas.

Daniel Jr. says

Orr's work is refreshingly honest, personal, smart, and human/humanist in an age of irony. Like John Gardner he gets back to the basics of what literature ultimately can do for us as people. Absent are the posturing and one-ups-man-ship so prevalent elsewhere. Orr is as sharp a thinker about poetry as anyone...actually, this work reminds me in part of Christian Wiman's recent essays.

Danielle says

Evocatively written book on the intersection and enmeshment of psychology and poetry.

Gerry LaFemina says

What a terrific discussion of the lyric impulse and its relationship to the personality and trauma of the poet, exploring the ordering nature of poetic language and looking at work from around the world. Smart, insightful, and engaging, this is one of my favorite books on the notion of lyricism.

Olga Hebert says

This is a book that is meant to be read and re-read over time.

Daniel Seifert says

In this prose work Orr reflects on some heavy themes that have evolved ("invented") from a rich history of the personal lyric "as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by extremities of subjectivity and also by such outer circumstances as poverty, suffering, pain, illness, violence, or loss of a loved one." In the second section of the book, "Trauma and Transformation" he writes on this theme via the lyrical works of great poets as Keats, Whitman, Dickinson, and Wilfred Owen. Orr offers discerning insight into the human need of survival via a long tradition of translating our crisis into language and giving it symbolic expression as an unfolding drama of self and the forces that assail it. Hence . . .

I emboldened with strength,
lyrically name, order powers,
shape imagination, bring
to bear the disordering
of my existence

Scott says

His workshop in Florida basically came right out of this book.

Ken says

In lieu of review, here are links to not one, not two, not three, but FOUR posts made using quotes and / or poems from Orr's book. Interesting stuff (uh, if you're interested in poetry, that is):

"When Something Strange Pounds on Your Door"
<https://kencraftpoetry.wordpress.com/...>

"When the World Slaps You, Poetry..."
<https://kencraftpoetry.wordpress.com/...>

"When I Becomes Us, the Poet Wins"
<https://kencraftpoetry.wordpress.com/...>

"The Mysterious Equations of Narrative Poetry, Where Less Is More"
<https://kencraftpoetry.wordpress.com/...>

Andrew says

A beautiful treatise on the healing powers of poetry. Also includes several interesting bios on well known poets.

Aliesha says

You have to love poetry, but if you don't you're unlikely to pick this book up anyhow.

The whole thing felt like late night conversations with a friend, at least assuming you're both lit majors.

ellie says

Wonderful, insightful, instructional book. Adding it to my list of favorite books and will be one I will definitely read again. A superior work.

Andrea says

Anyone who writes poetry must read this book.
Anyone who reads poetry must read this book.
Anyone who teaches poetry MUST read this book.
Anyone who has suffered trauma must read this book.
Anyone who works with people who have suffered trauma, must read this book.

This book is not an easy read - it is not a popular market, easy reading memoir. It is a well-researched and well-written analysis of how and why poetry is vital to our survival as humans. How it allows us to cope with the stresses and traumas of being human - how writing poetry, or reading poetry, can keep us alive when life

seems like it is tearing us apart. And all this is done, not just by looking at so many of the great authors, like Keats, Blake, Dickinson, Whitman, Plath, etc., but also through Gregory Orr's own gorgeous and eloquent prose and analysis.

He writes:

"We must, the personal lyric tells us, become vulnerable to what is out there (or inside us). Not in order to be destroyed or overwhelmed by it, but as part of a strategy for dealing with it and surviving it. Lyric poetry tells us that it is precisely by letting in disorder that we will gain access to poetry's ability to help us survive." (47)

"When I write a poem to help myself cope with a serious disturbance, I do so by registering the disorder that first destabilized me and then incorporating it into the poem. The literary result is the poem of survival." (130)

"The very hopelessness of the shattered self is its hope, because this devastated self possesses a radical freedom The self is . . . free to make new connections to the world." (121)

"What certain poets of trauma intuit is that their old self cannot survive the suffering it has experienced without succumbing. Thus necessity permits and compels imagination to create a new self, a self strong enough or different enough to move through and beyond the trauma and its aftermath." (121)

"Surely, we would be right to say that trauma is, by definition among the fiercest and most destructive forms disorder can take. Trauma, either on an intimate or collective scale, has the power to annihilate the self and shred the web of meanings that supports its existence. And yet the evidence of lyric poetry is equally clear - deep in the recesses of the human spirit, there is some instinct to rebuild the web of meanings with the same quiet determination we witness in the garden spider as it repairs the threads winds and weather have torn." (132)

I could go on and on, but most of the other quotes only work in context of the poems that he is discussing, which is one of the main strengths of this book, that he doesn't deal in abstracts, but rather in well researched specifics, obviously pulling from a deep well of knowledge.

If you like to learn, and be challenged by what you read, read this book. If you are looking for fluff, then don't read it. I, for one, loved this book. My favorite non-fiction book so far all year.
