



Journal of Poetry Therapy

The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tjpt20>

More than you were: writing my father's life, death and addiction

Christina Thatcher

To cite this article: Christina Thatcher (2021) *More than you were: writing my father's life, death and addiction*, Journal of Poetry Therapy, 34:4, 242-255, DOI: [10.1080/08893675.2021.1951902](https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1951902)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1951902>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2161



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

More than you were: writing my father's life, death and addiction

Christina Thatcher 

Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

In July 2013, I lost my father to a drug overdose. He was 45 years old and had been using cocaine and prescription painkillers for as long as I could remember. My debut poetry collection, *More than you were* (2017), was written as a way to cope with, explore and represent the impact of addiction on my family as well as consider how loving and losing an addict parent led me to experience disenfranchised grief. In this article, I reflect on my writing process and creative choices in relation to poetic form, metaphor, imagery, implication and accessible language. By discussing audience awareness, public appearances and reader engagement, I also consider what this collection might contribute to wider discussions about grief, stigma and bereavement by addiction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 August 2020
Accepted 11 November 2020

KEYWORDS

Poetry; poetry therapy; metaphor; grief; disenfranchised grief; stigma; addiction; parental loss

Introduction

In his book, *Poetry as Survival*, Orr (2002) states that traumatic experiences raise “unanswerable questions” which have “the power to initiate a quest for meaning and purpose” (p. 118). He states that this quest, born out of trauma, “doesn’t simply lead the survivor forward. First, it leads him or her backward, back to the scene of the trauma where the struggle must take place” (Orr, 2002, p. 118). My father’s overdose and death raised many questions about his life, my life, our relationship, and the nature of grief. And, as Orr suggests, for weeks I went “backward”, writing down everything I could remember about him. I wrote about my Dad’s red guitar, his pale Irish skin, his loud singing, his old Camaro. This stream-of-consciousness writing led to dozens and dozens of pages of unordered text.

As many expressive writing studies contest, I did feel a sense of temporary “relief” when writing about my father (Sloan & Marx, 2004, p. 122). However, approximately one month after his funeral, writing stopped working. I felt I had “expressed” everything. All my important memories had been documented and I was no longer feeling any “relief” from writing. It was at this point that I felt clear-headed enough to face some of my

CONTACT Christina Thatcher  cthatcher@cardiffmet.ac.uk,  Cardiff Metropolitan University, Office B1.16, Cyncoed Campus, Cyncoed Rd, Cardiff, Wales CF23 6XD, UK  @writetoempower

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

looming questions: what kind of childhood did I have? What kind of man was my father? What does it mean to love and lose someone to an addiction? How do I go on?

In her article, "Beyond Expressive Writing: Evolving Models of Developmental Creative Writing", Nicholls (2009) captured my experience well, stating that:

the writer gains some initial release from writing her feelings out onto the page and but then feels a need to move on, to begin to shape her material, learning to craft and redraft it, ultimately developing a new relationship with aspects of her self-experience. (p. 174)

At this point in my grief, I felt the need to turn to poetry. This drive to write poetry about my grief experience is not unique to me. According to Stepakoff (2009), any self-directed poetry writing about trauma can essentially be viewed as a form of "auto-poetic healing", a term which refers to the "processes whereby a trauma survivor utilizes written or oral poem-making as part of a spontaneous process of self-repair" (p. 108). Many studies in Poetry Therapy and beyond have observed that when:

events of enormous magnitude occur, events that are difficult to cognitively and emotionally assimilate, the urge to make poems is intensified. Although this innate desire to put feelings, experiences, and memories into poetic language is evident with regard to many forms of trauma, the experience of mourning is often associated with a particularly strong desire to write poems, perhaps because of the universal need to elegize and memorialize lost loved ones. (Stepakoff, 2009, p. 108)

In the years leading up to my father's death, I had written and published many poems which explored my past and various family issues. According to Holmes (2017), writing poetry is useful in "assisting with remembering, making sense of and de-traumatizing painful experience, and synthesising and expressing culturally different or unjust experiences" (p. 3). Even in the year leading up to my father's death, when his addiction and behaviour were becoming worse, I found writing poetry helped me cope. This meant that my desire to write poetry not only felt innate, as Stepakoff (2009) suggests, but also felt like a familiar and appropriate way to explore my grief. Because of this, writing poetry seemed a natural means by which to begin answering questions about my childhood and my father.

Methods and materials

In this article, I will reflect on the process and therapeutic value of writing my own poetry collection, *More than you were* (2017). I will explore the impact of reader and audience engagement with this collection and consider how my creative choices could help reduce the stigma associated with bereavement by addiction. By focusing on these areas, rather than a close textual analysis of my own work, I will be able to demonstrate the ways in which *More than you were* (2017) can add to the poetic and academic discussions of disenfranchised grief.

Creating order and taking control

Orr (2002) states that poetry can help "order individual lives around emotionally charged experiences by restabilising the self in a chaotic time" (p. 139). The months following my father's death felt particularly chaotic. I could not understand logically why I felt so bereft.

After all, I knew his lifestyle was risky and had, intellectually, accepted that he would die early as a result of his addiction. Before his death, I assumed losing him would be “okay” because he never really fulfilled his role of father in my life, as I understood it. For instance, he rarely offered me the emotional support other daughters might expect to receive. Our relationship consisted of little more than trying-to-be-pleasant phone calls and emails every few months. So, why did I feel destroyed by his death?

To answer this, I flicked back through the pages of disordered text I had written, searching for answers in my childhood. I revisited the early memories I wrote about and tried to identify emotional patterns and experiences linked to my young life. This exercise gave rise to the “Lessons” which comprise a series of ten short poems in *More than you were* (2017). These poems reflect things I was taught as a child and teenage girl. “Lesson #3” provides a clear example of the style and content of this series:

He asked me to wait
by the window and watch
as he slit the throat
of my pet turkey.
I saw the whole thing—
its head bobbing,
the blood splattering,
my sobs fogging
up the glass. Later,
to comfort me, he said
that some things were
never meant to be loved. (p. 18)

Barak and Leichtentritt (2016) state that the “disclosure of meaning through the writing of poetry, specifically, is considered to have unique advantages in meaning-reconstruction for an individual coping with trauma” (p. 937). According to their study, this is because writing poetry “brings out into the open hidden meanings that cannot be revealed through the common verbal expression” (Barak & Leichtentritt, 2016, p. 937). This poem, like the other “Lesson” pieces, represents a snapshot of a moment, using clear images and dialogue to reveal a filmic flashback of this interaction between me and my father. Together, these ten “Lesson” poems work to reveal deeper truths about my family and my childhood, allowing me – just as Barak and Leichtentritt (2016) suggest – to make meaning of my young life and its impact. Among other things, these “Lesson” poems helped me to trace back my attitudes towards love and give roots to my feelings of “separation anxiety” (Valentine et al., 2016).

In their chapter, “Every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome: the therapeutic role of poetry writing”, Bolton and Latham (2004) also discuss the therapeutic benefit of making choices in relation to poetic form. According to the *Poetry Archive*, “form” can be understood as “the physical structure of the poem” (e.g. the way the poem looks on the page, the length of its lines, the choice of stanzas, etc) and can refer to the use of a recognised or “familiar pattern” (e.g. blank verse, sonnet, villanelle, etc) (2020). Bolton and Latham (2004), note that many poets use:

tightly controlled poetic forms, such as the sonnet: a discipline of having to find just the right word or image for just the right place. This creation of order out of a previously inchoate mass

of emotions, thoughts, and experience, can enable not only clarity and succinctness of expression, but also understanding. (Bolton & Latham, 2004, p. 111)

The unexpected emotions and unanswered questions which accompany bereavement by addiction make it a particularly tumultuous experience. As Bolton and Latham (2004) suggest, using poetic form and setting clear rules for expressing my grief helped me to take control over this experience. This can be seen at work in the following inverted haiku from my collection:

Dry
I am running out of things
to say about you.
Blame me for your second death. (p. 69)

While traditional haiku uses a 5-7-5 syllable structure, this one employs the inverse: 7-5-7. This allowed me to represent the upside-down nature of grief in two ways. First, this inversion represents the difficulty I had in comprehending my father's death, and the sense that the world had turned upside-down. Second, it demonstrates the inverse of the traditional parent-child relationship. In life, my father would have been "responsible" for me but, in death, I am now responsible for "keeping him alive" through my writing. The short, three-line form also speaks to having less and less to write about my father, visually representing the idea that I was "running out of things to say".

Barak and Leichtentritt (2016) state that poetry is unique in that it has the ability to "organise and re-stabilise the existential chaos within traumatic bereavement" (p. 937). Even though "Dry" is the only poem in *More than you were* (2017) which employs a traditional poetic form, I did set strict structural rules for the poems in this collection in order to parse the chaotic, messiness of grief. For instance, I restricted all poems to 25 lines or less in order to focus sharply on a specific incident or emotion. This allowed me to trim down the "bigness" of my grief into manageable segments, portioning it out into memories, emotions, physical reactions, behaviours and so on. In fact, none of the 81 poems are more than 21 lines, with an average of 15 lines per poem. Eighteen of the poems are under 10 lines.

In addition to restricting the amount of lines, I also restricted my use of stanza breaks in an effort to better understand my grief experience. This meant that whenever I described grief or a traumatic memory I did so using one block of text. More than 60% of the poems in *More than you were* (2017) used this single block text form as a way to funnel down my grief experience and recreate its sudden impact. Together these short poems helped me to understand and present the "complicated, contradicting, multifaceted meanings all of which taken together adequately represent the experience of trauma and loss" (Barak & Leichtentritt, 2016, p. 937). By employing structural rules, "retelling" memories and "taking control" over my grief experience, writing poetry allowed me to gain new perspectives on my bereavement and myself (Nicholls, 2009, p. 179).

Audience awareness

The poet and novelist, Eileen Myers (2004) states that when she writes a book the "whole thing is a story for me" (p. 149). *More than you were* (2017) was certainly a "story for me" and writing it represented an invaluable part of my grieving process. But, also like Myers (2004), I

felt “less alone when telling my most private stories than at any other time” (p. 150). I knew early on that I did not just want to tell these stories to myself but that I wanted to curate them for an audience. According to Stepakoff (2009), in order for healing to occur:

it is necessary for the bereaved to move from a state of formless anguish to one in which the pain can be symbolized or represented, either in words or in non-verbal media such as drawings, music, and dance. It is also necessary to move beyond self-imposed or socially enforced isolation into a state of meaningful contact with at least one other human being. (p. 105)

Communicating with others about a bereavement helps mourners to organise and reestablish “a dialogue with society about one’s traumatic loss by communicating important stories and messages” (Barak & Leichtenritt, 2016, p. 937). For me, it was essential that my work speak to professional poets but also to the general public. I wanted to share my bereavement with *everyone* in order to become part of wider disenfranchised grief dialogue and, hopefully, reduce the stigma associated with bereavement by addiction.

The art of confession

According to Doka (1989), disenfranchised grief is defined as “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 4). Doka also suggests that society disenfranchises certain deaths – like those of an abusive parent or substance misuser – because “their complexities are not well understood or because they are associated with a high degree of social stigma” (Doka, 1989, p. 7). Bos et al. (2013) state that stigma by association relates to the “social and psychological reactions to people associated with a stigmatized person (e.g. family and friends) as well as people’s reactions to being associated with a stigmatized person” (p. 2). This means that the family members and close friends of substances misusers suffer similar stigmas to the users themselves.

These feelings of stigma can leave those like myself feeling isolated and unsupported in their expression of grief. Neimeyer and Jordan (2002) attribute much of disenfranchised grievers’ social isolation to society’s “empathetic failure”. They call on society – including the co-workers, friends and family members of those bereaved – to become “more empathetic” (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Empathy, according to Ingram and Nakazawa (2003), is “the ability to enter into another person’s world, approximate their experience, and connect based on the underlying thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that occur during the interaction” (p. 487).

Ingram and Nakazawa (2003) consider “sociocultural poetry” to be the kind of poetry most likely to increase empathy (p. 486). Sociocultural poetry is defined as:

writings that address the social, cultural, and racial lived experiences of members of oppressed groups ... Often the main character in the poem or story is the writer, however, one should not always make that assumption – the most important consideration is connecting to the lived experience expressed in the poem or story ... Readers interact with text and therefore are interacting with the writer’s or character’s lived experience. Empathy for the writer’s lived experience can develop if the readers are willing to move beyond their own cultural comfort zone and resonate with the feelings behind the words being expressed. (Ingram & Nakazawa, 2003, p. 487)

Although not technically considered an “oppressed group”, I believe that the definition of sociocultural poetry could be expanded to include poetry written by stigmatised

individuals, including those bereaved by addiction. One of my aims in publishing *More than you were* (2017) was to do exactly as Ingram and Nakazawa describe: build empathy in my readers. This is because, according to Heijnders and Van Der Meij (2006), building empathy is one of the most powerful ways to fight stigma.

According to Zucker (2014), confessional poetry often reminds “the audience of poetry’s social mission”. The first encounter readers would have with my social mission is my book’s description, which begins: “When David Thatcher died of a drug overdose in America, his daughter wrote to understand what came after” (Thatcher, 2017). This description on the back of *More than you were* (2017) directly expresses the autobiographical nature of the collection. I hoped that it would ground my work in reality, immediately eliciting trust from my readers. Like Tony Hoagland, I believe that if a poet:

speaks sincerely but not naively, and directly and passionately, that it can still be totally convincing and that people – readers and listeners – are deeply thirsty for straightforward, passionate speech. (O’Phillips, 2013)

The book’s description, in a way, represents my first confession: I disclosed that I had lost my father to addiction and invited readers to get a glimpse into what this meant. According to Zucker (2014), people like learning about the lives of others:

Tabloids, E! Hollywood specials, biographies, and pornography all pander to our natural voyeurism. But, unlike these other forms of commercial art, autobiographicality in poetry is a show of respect for the reader, a kind of humility not just humanity-on-display ... The autobiographicalistic poet is aware of the audience and doesn’t pretend otherwise.

Because *More than you were* (2017) is published by Parthian Books, and thereby public, readers know that *I know* they are there. They open the book with an understanding that I have invited them in and that the poems will represent my experiences of loving and losing a father to addiction.

Before they arrive at the poems, readers are likely to glance at the table of contents. This page represents the order I chose for the collection; one which begins in the first days of my grief experience. According to Brunner (2013), employing a “rough chronological order” and offering a narrative arc in the table of contents often “provokes an autobiographical reading” (p. 194). Documenting grief as an observable process that the reader “is invited to accept as ‘real’ helps to further build their trust and evoke empathy” (Brunner, 2013, p. 194).

Within *More than you were* (2017), as in most poetry collections, there are “two levels of narrative at work: the narrative of a single poem and the narrative that derives from the context of the whole volume” (Brunner, 2013, p. 193). This two-level narrative allowed me to build up, poem by poem, my identity, encouraging the reader to get to know me and, to an extent, my father. Instead of being told one coherent life story, “remembered in one moment”, readers are provided with “several separate moments”; this allows “a semantic connection between the individual poems to persist” which can “show process” and create a clear narrative arc (Brunner, 2013, p. 193).

Imagery and metaphor

By using concrete images – that is, images which can be touched, heard or seen – instead of abstractions, I also invited readers to “experience” grief alongside me. This can be seen

in the following poem which uses the image of “tar” to describe my grief in the early months of bereavement:

Terminology

In the months that followed
I would learn the terminology
of grief. Read outpourings on blogs,
collect informational leaflets,
buy more than one book with
a woman crying on the cover.
I would study it. Turn it over
and over, will it to move
to the mind and no longer
bubble up from the gut
– searing and heavy –
like tar. (p. 29)

According to Furman (2004), poetry which operates on the “level of image” can be powerful (p. 163). He states that:

An evocative and vivid image can linger in the mind long after words have been read. Unlike photographic images, images conjured by the mind that are triggered by the written word may be attributable as much to the receiver as to the source. The images inspired by a poem engage the reader in a creative relationship that moves beyond passivity to co-creation. (Furman, 2004, p. 163)

By employing the “tar” image in this poem, I am inviting readers to imagine the weight and feel of my grief. This invitation and the subsequent act of “co-creation” can encourage readers to develop empathy. Even though, according to Di Stefano (2015), “all griefs are as unprecedented, as original as the whorls in our fingerprints”, poets can “take the specific ceremonies of grief and loss and reenact them in such a way that they are meaningful to all who read their work”.

Just as imagery is an invitation for co-creation, metaphor also furthers the relationship between the writer and the reader. In her book, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*, Padel (2004) shares the etymology of the word “metaphor”:

Metaphor comes from the Greek verb *metapherein*: to carry across, to transport something from one place to another. The Latin word *translation* is an exact translation of the Greek word *metaphora*; at one level, translation and metaphor do the same thing: connect two worlds. (p. 261)

Padel (2004) suggests that metaphor can connect two worlds but the exact nature of these worlds, and what they represent, is never defined. I would like to suggest that a single metaphor can connect many “worlds”. Perhaps, most obviously, metaphor can connect the two words, and their meanings, that it is comparing (i.e. the phrase “my grief is a dark room”, this connects the meaning of “grief” with the meaning of “the dark room”). But metaphor can also allow the writer to connect “worlds” which help them understand something about their experience; that is, metaphor can help them link something abstract (like grief) to something concrete (like a dark room), thereby bringing “together two distinct domains of knowledge and meaning” (Stott et al., 2010, p. 10). Finally, metaphor can also connect the world of the writer to the world of the

reader in its ability to communicate “fully the depth and breadth of ambiguous emotional states and relationships” (Furman, 2004, p. 163). For instance, the reader may have no personal experience of grief, but they will be familiar with what it is like to be in a dark room, thereby offering them a glimpse into what it must be like to grieve. Although I use metaphor throughout *More than you were* (2017) the clearest example is in the following piece, in which I describe myself as a bird:

Grief

I am the centerpiece,
 a quiet bird that everything
 is meant to happen around.
 I am expected to stay still,
 to listen, to receive and repeat platitudes—
 not be too emotional. I must be sad
 but not too sad. Not hysterically sad.
 Still, I flutter and feel things.
 My emotions swell up, squawking.
 I flap my wings, become unpredictable.
 I make unbeautiful sounds.
 People hurtle towards me
 as I try and fail to break free. (p. 20)

Here I use the metaphor of “a quiet bird” – an animal which is generally associated with singing and freedom – to capture the oppressive feelings that came when others’ put expectations on my grief. Just as Corr (1999) suggests, I often felt my “grief reactions” were being disenfranchised (p. 17). This poem demonstrates the expectations placed on me to “be quiet”, “receive platitudes” and not be “too emotional”. In this poem, I am both the grieving daughter (the centerpiece) and the grieving “self” (the bird). The bird self is both my “free” self (unfettered by expectation) and my “squawking” emotions. By the end of the poem, I attempt to fight against the restrictions that have been placed on my grief reactions: I “flap my wings” and “make unbeautiful sounds”. Here the “bird” self is resisting disenfranchisement by doing what I feel is “natural” (i.e. flapping wings and making sound) even when what society considers the “natural” thing to be my quietness. This poem is intended to represent how I could not untangle myself from my grief and, how even in the face of heavy expectation to “stay still”, I could not fight the natural rising of emotions or the desire to “break free” and be allowed to grieve in a way which was most comfortable for me. According to Furman (2004), the impact of “a metaphor is more powerful and succinct than if one were merely to describe the dynamics of an experience or a relationship” (p. 17). This is certainly the case in this poem where describing the “logic” might confuse the reader but offering a metaphor can encourage them to become this bird along with me. The “bird” in this poem will be more “easily remembered” than the meaning or intentions behind the bird, thereby, allowing “the insights derived from metaphors to be more easily accessed for reflection” (Furman, 2004, p. 163). In addition to prompting reflection, metaphors also encourage more intuitive understanding from readers; it doesn’t matter if the reader understands my intentions the way I have laid out above. Because of the metaphor I have chosen, readers will understand that, at the heart of this poem, is my desire to break free of the expectations placed on me as a griever. Writing metaphorically about difficult topics like death can also allow

readers to deal with their own feelings “less directly” and lead to “less overwhelming” confrontations of any grief they themselves might be feeling (Furman, 2004, p. 169).

Direct and indirect meanings

According to Zucker (2014), the stories of self “gain oppressive power when kept taboo” and, therefore, “telling ‘the truth’ about life is liberation from this oppression”. Nelson (2013) seems to agree, stating that the poetic confession of personal experience has “became a vehicle for social and political agency” (p. 32). For me, writing candidly about being bereaved by addiction had the potential to initiate social change on a grass-roots level; readers and listeners of my work could build empathy with me which could lead them to reconsider their views on addiction or show them that all types of grief, whatever the cause, are equally valid.

Using accessible language in *More than you were* (2017) was essential in reaching the widest readership possible. This meant choosing the simplest words to convey complex messages. According to the Literacy Trust around “15%, or 5.1 million adults in England, can be described as ‘functionally illiterate’ which means they have literacy levels at or below those expected of an 11-year-old”. This provided my benchmark. As I wrote, I routinely tested the readability statistics using Word to assess the “accessibility” of the poems. Once the collection was finished, I used the ATOS Book Analyzer to help me assess the level of the text. The ATOS software takes into account:

the most important predictors of text complexity – average sentence length, average word length, and word difficulty level. The results are provided in a grade-level scale that is easy to use and understand.

The grade level for my finished collection was a “6.0” – suitable for a 6th grader in the U.S.A. or a Year 7 student in the U.K., aged 11 to 12 years old. By using accessible language, I could tell my story, on a literal level, to all readers.

While I used accessible language to tell direct stories about my grief to readers, I used what was “unsaid” in each poem to raise questions or tell an alternative story. One example can be seen clearly here:

Anticipation

I sat in the car
and waited
for whatever
you were doing
to finish.

You told me
if I was good
I could have
my own pack
of red gum
from the store.

For hours
I imagined
the taste

of cinnamon
that never came. (p. 8)

This poem shows only the direct or “surface” exchange between me (as a child) and my father. The reader never knows what the father is doing, what being “good” means and why the father never bought the gum. The reader is left with a sense of emptiness or loss from the anticipation that is never being fulfilled. By using implication here, the bigger, unsaid themes in the poem can speak to other unsaid themes stirred up throughout the collection. What is left unsaid across poems then culminates into a one recurring, but unasked, question: What kind of man was my father? Throughout the collection, I attempt to jostle the reader – pulling them back and forth by pairing happy memories with frightening ones. I hope that by doing this I encourage readers to ask themselves the same questions I asked myself in the depths of my grief.

Privacy and public appearances

Zucker (2014) states that writing confessional poetry which employs autobiographical details takes a risk, “usually a risk of content” as well as “privacy, reputation, and decency”. She states that the “Confessionalistic poet risks more; she is willing to undermine the boundaries of self. Often, she is writing at the frayed edge of the genre in the busy interstitial space between neurons” (Zucker, 2014). Nelson (2013) continues this conversation, stating that:

to call these poems ‘private’, which was the term of choice for critics for several decades, is not to settle a question about confessional poetry, but to identify one of its preoccupations. What is privacy? And for whom? (p. 32)

Although the challenges of loving and losing a father to addiction could be seen as something better kept “private”, it is precisely the act of “talking about the taboo, and translating the personal, and sometimes minor, experiences of a lifetime into poetry that makes it a powerful tool for breaking down stigma” (Di Stefano, 2015). Nelson (2013) states that taken together:

a directness of address, which produced the impression of candour and intimacy with the reader, and the shameful, dishonourable (Rosenthal’s term), or merely private nature of the content are a potent mix. (Nelson, 2013, p. 34)

The impact of this potent mix – the accessible and direct address coupled with “shameful” confessions – could best be felt when doing readings of my work. Holmes (2017) states that reading poetry aloud plays multiple roles by facilitating “community healing”, “representing group members’ voices”, helping audience members to revisit and begin processing the “meaning of their own experiences” (p. 7). After launching *More than you were* (2017), I embarked on a 30-city book tour across six countries, including the U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Costa Rica, Switzerland and Romania. My audiences ranged from teenagers in Costa Rica to pensioners in England. I read to poetry audiences in libraries and bookstores as well as more diverse audiences in noisy coffee shops and pubs.

After every reading, two things always happened: people told me I was “brave” or “courageous” for sharing my story; and people told me about their grief experiences, whether they were a “normal” griever or “disenfranchised griever”. Those who told me

I was “brave” were often implying or, later admitting, one of two things: “I have a similar experience to you but never had the courage to share it” or “I never considered what it must be like to grow up with addiction or lose someone to addiction”. In both cases, I felt that the poems led audience members to reconsider their beliefs about addiction and grief which, hopefully, began to reduce the stigma they may have associated with these things.

For those who shared their own grief stories, our conversations led me to believe that they felt “represented” in some way by my poetry (Holmes, 2017) and that this helped them feel less alone. Since the book’s release, I have received dozens of emails as well as Facebook and Twitter messages from people I met at readings who wanted to share how the poems impacted them. According to Pinhasi-Vittorio (2018), exchanges like this are important for both the audience and the writer, stating that:

The audience plays an important role in this process of exchanging thoughts and emotions. This mutual process of giving and receiving can create a sense of community among trauma victims, who often feel isolated by their experiences. Shared experiences can penetrate this isolation that is the byproduct of their lives’ events. Very often, the emergence of the common experience can bring with it feelings of empathy and caring. (p. 213)

Since individuals bereaved by addiction often feel isolated, I found these stories from audience members particularly valuable. Just as, I may have been reminding them that they were not alone in their grief, so too were they reminding me. These opportunities to communicate face-to-face also allowed for the exchange of resources and ideas; I often found myself recommending and being recommended books and poetry by audience members.

Reading my poems aloud also helped me take control over my grief narrative. According to Holmes (2017), reading a poem aloud to an audience and:

incorporating pauses, phrasing, breathing and voicing or intonation of speech, the spoken word framework permits a sense of relief, through releasing these “secret” feelings, allowing emotional components of life experience to be comprehended by an audience. A poetic format further limits what words are included, emphasising important and relevant sentiments. Particularly after trauma, whether external, or subjectively experienced, such sharing provides an avenue by which individuals’ unique voices may be expressed, and by which empathetic and caring messages enter, and healing can occur. (p. 7)

Reading poems from *More than you were* (2017) to hundreds of people from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds empowered me. I was turning something traumatic into something that could foster community and help reduce stigma.

Results and discussion

The stigma associated with substance misuse impacts the way that friends, family and the public act towards those bereaved by addiction (Valentine et al., 2016). Because my father struggled with addiction and we were not particularly close, co-workers, friends and family did not understand my grief or my reactions, leaving me to feel that both my relationship and mourning were disenfranchised (Corr, 1999; Doka, 1989). I also experienced stigma by association (Bos et al., 2013) and felt the need to use my poetry to explore and counteract this. Poems in the collection like “First Drafts” showed my need to protect my father and his reputation and poems like “Finding You” showed my

desire for him to be seen as more than just someone struggling with addiction. My disenfranchised grief experiences aligned closely to those outlined in research and my poetry attempts to express this. According to Morris et al. (2019), sharing personal stories “facilitates experiential processing, heightening affective engagement and emotional arousal, which serve as an impetus for action-taking” (p. 19). This means that the audiences who engage with the work of this collection or my readings may, as a result, reflect on their own feelings about this stigmatised experience. This reflection could lead them to change their mind about aspects of bereavement by addiction and/or “take action” to help change the minds of others.

Although much research has been done on the benefits of writing and sharing poetry, this is often discussed in relation to non-writing populations. Most expressive writing and poetry therapy studies target groups who, while they may have an interest in writing, do not do it professionally. Given the benefits I gained from writing, crafting and reading my work as a published poet, I believe it would also be worth conducting research specifically designed to explore the impact of writing and publishing poetry about trauma. For instance, what therapeutic benefit does one gain from crafting a poem to a publishable standard? And does the form and quality of a poem – as much as the content of a poem – offer benefit to its reader or listener? Finally, I participated in radio and podcast interviews where I read poems from *More than you were* (2017); this raises the question of how these interviews might work as stigma-reducing “contact” (Heijnders & Van der Meij, 2006).

Although *More than you were* (2017) has limited knowledge to add to the academic discussions of disenfranchised grief, it could add to the poetic ones. According to Rajabali (2014) poetic phrases can:

crystallise meaning and poetry often has the capacity to penetrate experience more deeply than ordinary prose. The distillation of meaning experienced in a poetic phrase, spoken or written, can seep into our consciousness and stay there for further reflection. (p. 46)

Stepakoff (2009) notes that many survivors of suicide have reported that “in the aftermath of the death, they felt compelled to search for or cite pre-existing poems and songs that expressed what they were not able to find the words to express” (p. 106). As someone bereaved by addiction, I also felt compelled to search for poems that expressed my unique grief experience and found very few. *More than you were* (2017) contributes to the limited poetic literature on bereavement by addiction, adding to the store of pre-existing poems that others bereaved by addiction might seek out and “find solace in” (Stepakoff, 2009, p. 106). In fact, I hope that *More than you were* (2017) will do many things out in the world: help readers feel less alone in their grief; encourage other poets to publish work about disenfranchised grief; reduce the stigma associated with bereavement by addiction; and redeem my father who, like everyone struggling with an addiction, deserve empathy and compassion.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the magazines and anthologies who published poems from *More than you were*; to Bare Fiction for shortlisting it in the Bare Fiction Debut Poetry Collection Competition in 2015; and to Parthian Books for publishing the collection in 2017. Thank you as well to anyone who has listened to these poems and told me their own bereavement stories at bookstores, art galleries, universities, pubs and cafes across the U.K., U.S.A., Costa Rica, Switzerland and Romania.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Christina Thatcher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0105-6797>

References

- Barak, A., & Leichtenritt, R. D. (2016). Creative writing after traumatic loss: Towards a generative writing approach. *British Journal of Social Work, 47*(3), 936–954. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw030>
- Bolton, G., & Latham, J. (2004). Every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome: The therapeutic role of poetry writing. In G. Bolton, S. Howlett, C. Lago, & J. K. Wright (Eds.), *Writing cures: An introductory handbook of writing in counselling and therapy* (pp. 256). Routledge.
- Bos, A., Pryor, J., Reeder, G., & Stutterheim, S. (2013). Stigma: Advances in theory and research. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 35*(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.746147>
- Brunner, E. (2013). Confessional poetry: A poetic perspective on narrative identity. In C. Holler, & M. Klepper (Eds.), *Rethinking narrative identity persona and perspective* (pp. 187–202). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Corr, C. (1999). Enhancing the concept of disenfranchised grief. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying, 38*(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.2190/ld26-42a6-1eav-3mdn>
- Di Stefano, D. (2015). A defense of train wrecks: Lyric narrative poetry and the legacy of confessionalism. *Shenandoah, 65*(1), 1. Retrieved from: <https://shenandoahliterary.org/651/2015/07/28/a-defense-of-train-wrecks-lyric-narrative-poetry-and-the-legacy-of-confessionalism/>
- Doka, K. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.
- Form – Glossary – Poetry Archive. (2020). *Poetry archive*. <https://poetryarchive.org/glossary/form/>
- Furman, R. (2004). Using poetry and narrative as qualitative data: Exploring a father's cancer through poetry. *Families, Systems, & Health, 22*(2), 162–170. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1091-7527.22.2.162>
- Heijnders, M., & Van Der Meij, S. (2006). The fight against stigma: An overview of stigma-reduction strategies and interventions. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 11*(3), 353–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548500600595327>
- Holmes, T. (2017). Group healing through sharing poetry, songs, and stories: Learning through participant observation in rural Victoria. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 30*(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2016.1256464>
- Ingram, M., & Nakazawa, M. (2003). Developing empathy among community college counselors through sociocultural poetry. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 27*(6), 485–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713838183>
- Morris, B., Chrysochou, S., Christensen, P., Orquin, J., Barraza, D., Zak, L., & Mitkidis, J. (2019). Stories vs. facts: Triggering emotion and action-taking on climate change. *Climatic Change, 154*(1-2), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02425-6>
- Myers, E. (2004). Long and social. In G. Scott, R. Glück, & C. Roy (Eds.), *Biting the error: Writers explore narrative* (pp. 149–151). Coach House Books.
- Neimeyer, R., & Jordan, J. (2002). Disenfranchisement as empathic failure: Grief therapy and the co-construction of meaning. In K. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (pp. 95–118). Research Press.
- Nelson, D. (2013). Confessional poetry. In J. Ashton (Ed.), *American poetry Since 1945* (pp. 31–45). Cambridge University Press.
- Nicholls, S. (2009). Beyond expressive writing: Evolving models of developmental creative writing. *Journal of Health Psychology, 14*(2), 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105308100201>
- O'Phillips, B. (2013). *Interview with Tony Hoagland*. <https://medium.com/@bertophillips/interview-with-tony-hoagland-a47c0f97e620>

- Orr, G. (2002). *Poetry as survival*. The University of Georgia Press.
- Padel, R. (2004). *52 ways of looking at a poem*. Vintage.
- Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (2018). Writing, sharing, and healing: The interplay of literacy in the healing journey of the recovering from substance abuse. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 31(4), 209–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2018.1504668>
- Rajabali, A. (2014). On writing a poem: A phenomenological inquiry. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 7(2), 39–51.
- Sloan, D. M., & Marx, B. P. (2004). Taking pen to hand: Evaluating theories underlying the written disclosure paradigm. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11(2), 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bph062>
- Stepakoff, S. (2009). From destruction to creation, from silence to speech: Poetry therapy principles and practices for working with suicide grief. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36(2), 105–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2009.01.007>
- Stott, R., Mansell, W., Salkovskis, P., Lavender, A., & Cartwright-Hatton, S. (2010). *Oxford guide to metaphors in CBT: Building cognitive bridges*. Oxford University Press.
- Thatcher, C. (2017). *More than you were*. Parthian Books.
- Valentine, C., Bauld, L., & Walter, T. (2016). Bereavement following substance misuse. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 72(4), 283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815625174>
- Zucker, R. (2014). Confessionalography: A GNAT (Grossly Non-Academic Talk) on “I” in Poetry | poet-s.org. <https://poets.org/text/confessionalography-gnat-grossly-non-academic-talk-i-poetry>