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Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds) | Reviewed by Imogen Mathew

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Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War

Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds)

Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019
Reviewed by Imogen Mathew

As a lecturer in professional military education on the Australian Command and Staff Course, my day-to-day work involves helping Defence personnel with their academic writing. Many of my students left secondary school early to join the forces; a quarter of our cohort comes from an ESL background; and those with a tertiary education favour STEM disciplines. In this context, writing an essay on the Peloponnesian War or Social Identity Theory is hard work: students must produce thesis statements and topic sentences; their writing must be clearly signposted, follow a logical structure, and be supported by appropriate and credible evidence. There are important reasons to write in this way, but my goal is not to create league upon league of scholars. Rather, I hope to imbue my students with a passion for writing that extends beyond the marking rubric to something more personal and long-lasting. And in this, the spirit that animates my daily work is shared by the editors of Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War.¹

Why We Write is an anthology of essays published under the aegis of the Military Writers Guild in late 2019. Randy Brown and Steve Leonard edit the collection; both are veterans who have parlayed their military experience into successful writing careers. Brown has published several poetry collections as well as embedding with US forces as a civilian journalist in Afghanistan. Leonard is a lecturer at the University of Kansas and a senior fellow at the Modern War Institute at West Point. Between them, Brown and Leonard have gathered together a multitude of voices (military, ex-military and civilian), all of whom explore the meaning writing has for them in their professional and personal lives. The contributors to this collection are predominately US-based, although there is a sprinkling of Australian authors. At 61 essays, the number of contributions is quite high for an edited collection; and, coming in at a total of 225 pages, the length of

¹ Jonathan Baxter, ‘Dreaming of Ishtar In the Land of Two Rivers’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 168.
Why We Write: Crafting Essays on Writing War

each essay is correspondingly short. Yet length constitutes one of this collection’s chief attractions: these bite-sized essay morsels are accessible and engaging, and their brevity allows readers to dip in and out of the anthology with ease. This collection thus has a broad appeal, and will be of interest to civilians and military professionals alike: a relatively low time investment (say, an empty 5 minutes between zoom meetings) will yield a highly satisfying reading experience.

Many of the essays engage directly with the question ‘Why I write?’, and the answers are as individual as each author. Some contributors emphasise the professional benefits that accrue to those who write: for Mick Ryan, ‘being a better writer makes me a more thoughtful leader.’ In other essays, writing represents a powerful therapeutic ‘tool for processing loss, grief, and change.’ Some write to ensure forgotten voices are heard: for instance, Hugh Martin writes to create a ‘more multi-vocal, polyphonic tapestry’ of the Iraq War. There are those who write for the ‘rush,’ ‘to create a legacy,’ or ‘to give [their] life meaning.’ Writing may not come easy, but it is as essential as a good night’s sleep.

A smaller selection of essays are as interested in the process as they are in the outcome, and offer valuable insights into the how of writing. Josh Powers offers a particularly evocative example:

I try to write every day. Most mornings, I am awake at a time that feels unnatural yet efficient, an old habit from years of early mornings. With a cup of hot coffee in hand, I reflect on the previous day’s notes. I might read a few business or military articles. I capture some fragments in a separate section of my notebook, with pages reserved for reflection, thoughts, and lessons-learned. Then, I consider these elements in the light of this question: Which of

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2 Mick Ryan, ‘Writing and Our Profession’, in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 44.

3 Colin D Halloran ‘The Warrior-Poet and an Unexpected Journey’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 201.

4 Hugh Martin, ‘An Iraq War Veteran Reads the Iraq War’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 208.

5 Carmen Gentile, ‘Some True Lies about Conflict Reporting’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 8.

6 Joe Byerly, ‘Pressing the Button’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 16.

7 Baxter, ‘Dreaming of Ishtar’, p 68.

8 Tom McDermott, ‘Armour Against Atrocity: Writing to Find One’s Moral Compass’ in Randy Brown and Steve Leonard (eds), Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War, Middle West Press LLC, Johnston IA, 2019, p 93.

these thoughts could benefit someone else?¹⁰

Here, there are no rules on how to write, just principles and lessons learned. The tone is free of didacticism, and Powers makes no attempt to coerce the reader into his daily rituals. Rather, Powers’s reflections are generous and giving; he shows the reader what works for him in an effort to highlight one of the many paths that could begin a writing journey.

The key argument pursued by the editors of this collection relates to the centrality of writing in the development of modern Western militaries. While there is already a notable amount of scholarship that addresses the importance of reading to the profession of arms (see, most prominently, The Leader’s Bookshelf by James Stavridis and R. Manning Ancell, and The Challenge of Command by Roger Nye), writing is given considerably less attention. This is where the originality of Brown and Leonard’s collection comes fully into view. Why We Write is unique in the way it promotes the act of writing to military professionals. By making an argument for the importance of writing, the editors also make an implicit argument for the importance of individuality, creativity and self-reflection within the profession of arms. This approach introduces a note of vulnerability into our understanding of the profession of arms:

Many junior leaders perceive the Army as “zero defect,” where mistakes are unacceptable or seen as weakness. I once shared these fears. Now, I write to demonstrate to others that not having all of the answers is OK. … My writing stems from personal shortcomings and professional failures, and growing from those experiences.¹¹

This approach also recognises that each person ‘[has] a story to tell’ and that this story is ‘unique’ to the individual,¹² and refuses to view Defence personnel as uniform and homogenous.

This anthology’s main audience (like the majority of its contributors) is military professionals. And it is this audience who will gain the most from this book; indeed, it seems that the intention underlying this anthology is to transform an audience of readers into an active community of writers. As Charles G Ingram puts it in his Introduction, ‘Our hope is that one of these writers will inspire you to tell [your] story, in your own way.’ Thus, beyond profiling the work of a dynamic community of practice, the intent behind this collection is to


entertain, encourage and, above all, inspire would-be writers. This is no mean feat when the potential audience for this book may have chosen a military career precisely because they lacked confidence or ability in their writing skills. Thus, a key function of *Why We Write* is to render accessible a practice that may not be an obvious or especially comfortable bedfellow for its intended audience. Further to this, the editors of *Why We Write* work hard to remove any sense of hierarchy from the practice of writing. In this sense, it is impressive that the writers are identified by name only; there are no prefixes of rank or learning (for example, either MAJGEN or Dr) in the authors’ by-line. Essays by well-known and widely published authors, such as Peter W Singer, Max Brooks, Kori Schake and Thomas E Ricks, rub shoulders with the work of little-known veterans who now work as marketing executives or run manufacturing businesses. This is in keeping with the general ethos of the book, which aims to democratise the act of writing. You don’t need to be a highly literate academic or extensively published author for your story to be of value. The message here seems to be that if you can write, you *should* write.

All contributors to this collection are alike in their endorsement of writing, both as a process and as an object that circulates in the world. In both these views, to write is to enact change on a scale that ranges from the infinitesimally small to the wholesale re-visioning of self, nation and history. This type of insight is not new: writing on writing is a widely recognised and popular genre. Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, Stephen King’s *On Writing*, and Haruki Murakami’s *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* are just four of the many titles that explore the writing process. And these are just the single-authored texts; collections such as Meredith Maran’s *Why We Write* feature interviews with some of the most experienced and successful practitioners in the business including Jodi Piccoult, Isabel Allende, Terry McMillan, Ann Patchett, and Jennifer Egan. Those in search of writing advice and inspiration would do well to consult any of the texts mentioned above. Given the scholarship that already exists in this genre, the true value of Brown and Leonard’s *Why We Write* lies less in its reflections on the writing process, and more on the way it makes a substantive case for military personnel of all levels to embrace writing as part of their ongoing professional development.\(^\text{13}\)

It is not sufficient, this collection argues, to concentrate the core business of the military on a panoply of hardware. This argument coheres strongly...
with messaging from the Australian Department of Defence regarding what it calls the Joint Professional Military Education Continuum. In a recently released guidebook, we are told that ‘the Australian Defence Force cannot rely on a long term capability edge, as regional military modernisation has started to diminish Australia’s advance. Therefore, the greatest opportunity to generate advantage over the adversary is through an intellectual edge.’ The Australian Defence Force offers many ways to obtain this intellectual edge, including through participation on the Australian Command and Staff Course, or the Defence and Strategic Studies Course. However, this intellectual edge can be honed just as sharply through the informal and accessible writing practice demonstrated in *Why We Write*.

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