

These Mountains We Carry

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הרים אלו אנו נושאים

הצעה מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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Aims and General Description

These Mountains We Carry will be a selection of short stories about the ways people cope with emotional pain, loss or traumatic experiences. In particular, each story will focus on the impact such struggles have in the everyday life of the individual and in the relationships they share with their partners, family and friends. The nature of these traumas will include (but not be limited to): mourning the loss of a spouse and its effect on the relationship between father and son, suffering a miscarriage and coping with its emotional impact on a marriage, and the psychological turmoil that a lifetime of loneliness might impose on an individual. I aim for the stories to reflect elements of the human condition in a realistic and identifiable way, mostly using the third person limited perspective, but also first person in a few of the stories.

Conceptual Background

As the youngest of eight, I often found myself on the outskirts of family affairs and traumas, particularly due to the large gaps in age between me and my siblings. During my late pre-teens, while the majority of my family were in their twenties and thirties, married and with children of their own, I found myself trying to make my own sense of divorce, cancer and drug addiction, all of which disrupted our lives at one time or another. I remember trying my best to piece together the meaning behind these difficult events, none of which affected me as deeply as they did my siblings, who had been old enough to feel their consequences at the time.

Then, throughout my early twenties when the age-gap had narrowed, my siblings and parents often approached me of their own accord to relay the lasting effects of these traumas on their own lives, particularly, they said, because I was the most impartial family member, the one who had always been too young to understand. It is from these observations of my family and their personal stories that my desire to write about trauma and its effects was ignited.

This interest continued during university, when I took a course in World War I literature. The first-hand accounts of soldiers with shell-shock and of doctors treating the condition developed my interest in this area, leading me to write my thesis on the presentation of psychological trauma in WWI fiction. The stories that interested me most were ones that dealt with the effects that PTSD had on soldiers' relationships back home, such as Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*. One of my other favourites, 'Nobody', a little-known short story by Hugh Walpole, presents a returned soldier from the perspective of his cousin, who observes that the war has literally turned him into a nobody, without an identity, which in turn forces everyone around him to treat him as though he is not there. As a result of my previous work on the topic, there will be a story in *These Mountains We Carry*

set in the immediate aftermath of WWI, specifically dealing with PTSD and its impact on a marriage.

My stories will not focus on the event of the trauma itself, but rather its aftermath, and how characters' lives are affected as a result. Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* does this in a way that makes the pivotal event seem the least crucial part of the novel (despite the fact that it is cold-blooded murder). The real story lies in the reactions of the characters in the build-up and aftermath of that event, which is relayed in the book's prologue. In my view, it is this focus on character that tells the story of a traumatic event better than a re-telling of the event itself, and that, I hope, will be evident in all the stories included in *These Mountains*.

Virginia Woolf has been a source of inspiration when it comes to using object as symbol. In *To the Lighthouse* the lighthouse itself has been seen as a symbol of anything from the grounded individual to truth residing over darkness, while in *Jacob's Room* a sheep's skull in the very first scene symbolises death, foreshadowing a theme that envelops the entire novel. To me, the use of symbols and/or images is far more effective than detailed descriptions of an emotion itself, which often fall flat and do not allow the reader to participate or empathise with the emotion depicted. As a result, I hope that the use of symbols in *These Mountains* will allow the reader to have a more practical and important role throughout. So, in one story, a seamstress is forcibly reminded of her miscarriage while making a wedding dress for a pregnant client. In another, a man stricken by loneliness revels in an ant infestation in his kitchen, both emphasising his solitude and bringing him comfort.

All of the stories will also feature 'Moments of Being', a term invented by Virginia Woolf to describe instances when an individual experiences a sense of reality, whether through shock, discovery or revelation. Each story in *These Mountains* describes a character's journey through their suffering to the point where they can make at least some sense of it, some means of living with it. Alice Munro includes such instances in the linked

stories from her collection *Runaway*: ‘Soon’, ‘Chance’ and ‘Silence’, when Juliet - the character who appears in all three - experiences significant moments of relief and understanding, often upon reflecting on the past or discovering something after pages of searching for it.

Munro has a way of weaving in and out of the past, framing her stories so that we learn a great deal about the characters in only a few pages. I intend each of the stories in *These Mountains* to be a character study, sometimes, like Munro, using movements in time to inform the reader, while also building a close relationship between reader and character through the third person limited perspective, which Munro does so successfully.

Two novels that I feel convey trauma and tragedy with a particular poignancy, especially in the way they deal with the toll these hardships have on relationships, are Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* and John Williams’ *Stoner*. The protagonist in the former - Watanabe - must deal with his best friend’s death, as well as the toll it takes on the woman he loves and the relationship that forms between them, while William Stoner must cope with an emotionally abusive wife and an alcoholic daughter, who finds it difficult to deal with her parents’ turbulent relationship. Both books are slow and subtle in their revealing of the effects of these issues, something that the reader may only be able to piece together fully after finishing them. However, I am aware that the short story does not lend itself to such gradual exposure of character, and for this reason I intend to use specific pivotal moments in these books (such as Stoner being pushed out of his job or the moment Watanabe discovers Naoko’s death) to guide the presentation of my protagonists’ circumstances.

Finally, I feel it is necessary to dip into some non-fiction books that focus on the science behind the effects of psychological trauma. A leading work in this area is Bessel Van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. The book deals not only with the effects of trauma itself but also with the effects on

those who experience trauma second-hand by having had to observe it or to deal with its consequences in others. The book includes first hand stories as well as recent neuroscientific research that attempts to help the reader gain a better understanding of why traumatic experiences affect us the way they do. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* is divided into two parts, each with numerous chapters discussing different types of trauma and methods of healing. It is the section on recovery that I will make most use of, as it presents ways in which one can rebuild relationships and deal with mourning and loss in day-to-day life, topics which are very pertinent to my project.

Shape of Project

These Mountains they Carry will consist of roughly 8 short stories, ranging in length from 3000 to 5500 words. Each story will focus on a different traumatic experience from its protagonist's past, and present his/her journey towards acceptance and recovery. The stories will describe not only the effects of trauma on a single character, but also the way their relationships with others shape their understanding of their suffering, and ultimately how these connections either help or hinder their healing process.

The following is a partial list of the stories. All the stories listed will be written in a third person limited perspective, but the distance between the characters and narrators will vary:

- 'The Seamstress' – A seamstress who has recently suffered a miscarriage is commissioned to make a wedding dress for a pregnant client, while also struggling with the deterioration of her marriage.
- 'Rain' – A man mourns the recent death of his wife and grapples with how to approach this loss with his young son on the day of the funeral.
- 'To Love a Soldier' – Set just after World War I, a young woman welcomes her husband home from war to find that, due to their wartime experiences, their lives can never revert to what they once were.
- 'The Colony' – A man who struggles making connections with others ponders over his past while trying to exterminate a colony of ants in his kitchen.

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