

Review

Pooky Knightsmith, *Using Poetry to Promote Talking and Healing*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2016, 242 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-1-78592-053-0, £14.99.

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Pooky Knightsmith writes from her perspective as a specialist in paediatric mental health. Her mini-biography states that she is a “specialist in child and adolescent mental health and emotional wellbeing. She is Director of the Children, Young People and Schools Programme at the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust, and mental health and emotional wellbeing advisor for the PSHE Association in the UK”. She writes a poem each day on her poetry blog (pookypoetry.wordpress.com) and lives in England.

This book is designed to be a therapeutic tool. This is a practical toolkit in book form, clearly deriving from the author’s own lived experience and professional context, and her own work in producing poetry and reflective questions on the poems. She is able to reflect upon what the poetic process means for her and suggests how others might benefit from a similar process. The chapter headings are grouped into three parts. The first is relatively short, offering a rationale and method for using poetry “as a way in” to a difficult conversation: to aid reflection, to explore emotions and stimulate response as part of a therapeutic relationship. Part 2 consists of a collection of Knightsmith’s own poems, on subjects which include loss and bereavement, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide, and recovery. She also offers suggestions for therapeutic activities that could be used alongside each poem. In Part 3 she actually produces 50 helpful prompts to stimulating poetry writing.

The suggestions for ways of exploring particular poems as therapeutic interventions tend to be person-centred. They offer a variety of questions to open up emotional responses within a “client”. I found some of the extension activities suggested in Part 2 quite imaginative and creative, such as

asking how the feelings provoking a panic attack might be depicted using shape or colour as a piece of art. However, much of the material derives from work with older children and young adults, so both the poems themselves and the author's "prompts" are largely suitable for work with children and young people – and fairly literate, educated children at that. In addition, the author's context will not necessarily be applicable to chaplains or therapeutic staff working in other settings such as acute healthcare. It is worth noting that the book often seems to presuppose a similar setting and client group to those the author works with, without always making this explicit. It would have been helpful to have had some distinction between principles that are contextually linked, and those that might have a wider application.

I was on the lookout for anything I might be able to use in my role as an acute hospital chaplain, perhaps with bereaved families or even with staff. Unfortunately, this was difficult to imagine. The poems and suggested applications imply a one-to-one on-going therapeutic relationship with time for preparation and follow-up, not to mention the all-important building of trust. In my experience this is rarely possible in a one-off hospital encounter; and in the acute setting the situation tends to be extremely raw. However, if I were visiting a patient or family over a period of time, there might be resources here that I could adapt and use. A few of the poems I felt might be suited to work with adults include "Leftover love" and "Scars". I might consider using "Is it better to have loved and lost?"; "Highs and Lows" or "Calmer Waters" at a funeral. In terms of using the poems, it would have been helpful to know whether the author gives explicit permission for such pastoral use. The reference I found gives implicit consent for reproduction, but again this is within the context of a one to one therapeutic relationship: "all the poems in this section are downloadable. You can use these directly, or you can use them to inspire your own discussions and activities" (pp. 19–20).

Many of the poems clearly arise out of particular stories experienced by the author. Some of the most powerful poems for me are in the "Eating Disorders and body image" section (beginning on p. 80), which are intensely personal and evocative. I can envisage using these resources to explore such issues in a training session with staff or volunteers. Some poems I am sure will resonate with readers and will help with their own or their team's reflective practice – and perhaps as an aid to their own clinical supervision or even prayer. However, on the whole Parts 1 and 2 of this book will be largely relevant to a specialist readership, particularly young people's counsellors or other professionals such as specialist nurses, teachers or social workers.

The creative writing prompts in Part 3 are very different. The author encourages beginners to write their own poetry, either as part of the therapeutic process for clients, or for the therapist. She asserts that "writing our

own poetry can be incredibly therapeutic” and hopes that her prompts might inspire others to experiment with different poetic forms, and even have the confidence to share their efforts. As someone who has started dozens of poems over the years, I was inspired to have another go, just for my own pleasure. There are certainly resources here for would-be poets and perhaps for anyone leading a workshop at a Quiet Day or retreat. Overall this book does not strike me as being readily applicable to my own role, unfortunately; although there are resources I can use or adapt, and principles I can apply. I would commend it to anyone who is looking for a resource to use with older children or young people, either individually or in small groups. Knight-smith should be thanked for her openness in sharing her own resources and for tackling some difficult topical areas such as self-harm in such a sensitive and practical way.