



Review of *Unwound: Poems from Enduring Wars*, Liam Corley, 2023. Middle West Press

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BOOK REVIEW


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ABSTRACT

A review of the poetry collection *Unwound: Poems from Enduring Wars*, Liam Corley, 2023. Middle West Press.

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Understanding the different experiences of military servicemembers and veterans is imperative for those interested in supporting military affiliated populations. This understanding can come from many sources, including documentaries, panel presentations at conferences, and literature. These opportunities provide interested participants different ways to understand the military experience. Liam Corley's (2023) book, *Unwound: Poems from Enduring Wars*, is a collection that provides an insightful glimpse into the military experience. Corley, writing from his own time in the military, delivers poems that ignite an interest in the ways servicemembers serve, deploy, and transition. Corley uses his own experience overseas, but he also provides details for experiences common to the military affiliated population. Through his writing, Corley invites readers to poetically encounter the military experience to further their own understanding of the lives of our "servicemembers, veterans, and their families." This poetry collection is an insightful, creative representation of the different lives military members live.

Liam Corley is a professor of English and modern languages, in the college of letter arts, and social sciences at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (2024). He specializes in veterans in American literature, as well as science fiction and poetry. An established scholar in veterans studies, Corley has multiple publications focused on understanding the military experience through teaching, writing, and reading literature. For example, his article, "Teaching as Leading: Valuing the Veteran in All of Us" was included in a 2016 special edition of Duke University's Press' journal, *Pedagogy*, and focused on connecting military culture to effective teaching practices for veterans in the classroom (see Corley, 2016).

In what is his first book of poetry, *Unwound*, Corley utilizes his time as an officer in the Navy Reserve, as well as his multiple deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and areas of operation in the Pacific region (see Corley, 2023). As I show in this review, these deployments, as well as his time transitioning out of the military, influence his poetry and provide a deeper understanding of the military experience.

Unwound is broken up into five sections that all approach the military experience in different ways. The first section, "Small Wars and How they Start," includes eight poems that outline his time preparing for war. The second section, "Underway," details his experience on a deployment to different places, including combat areas like Kabul, Afghanistan. The third section, "Mentioned in Dispatches," includes poems that highlight his time overseas, as well as poems that show his interactions with others in life after returning home. The fourth section, "Thank you for Sending Me," elucidates the life at home, away from the military and deployments, and provides not only experiences to

learn from but also delivers insight into the consequences of wars veterans confront when returning home. His final section, "Nothing/Happening" furthers his exploration of veterans and their families after deployments and war, as well as elucidate the complicated life veterans must walk in their transition.

When writing about war, Corley (2023) creatively provides detail for the audience and delivers imagery that places the reader closer to the setting and action of the poem. In the poem, "unwound," a piece written for "the other soldiers," or those who never fired back, he develops the setting through descriptive stanzas like, "sleeping in armor/under a rifle's dead weight/crammed in rows," or, "Head drawn back in a helmet's grip/throat bare behind/a moistened Kevlar strap" (p. 3, lines 3–7). The armor, rifle, and helmet provide an imagery that the audience can see; furthermore, his imagery of "being cramped" (in rows) and the feel of a moistened strap, provide the audience an ability to feel the experience he is showing. This particular poem tells of the "story" of a service member who did not experience combat, showing an impactful emotional effect: "I see you with a yellow ribbon wound/tight around your chest looking down/when asked about the war" (p. 3, lines 15–17). This detail is what supplies the reader with a firm understanding of who experienced this imagery, while understanding their relation to the ways in which war is felt.

Corley's (2023) poems that cover experiences before deployment also provide detail into the struggles of being a deploying service member with a family. These poems provide a lens in which readers can view the holistic impact a deployment has on the entire family. In the poem "The First Day," Corley describes the impact a deployment has on his family and marriage. He starts off part of the poem with,

When a man receives a letter demanding his
presence/for a specified term/of days pressing
shod feet into another land's resisting earth/he
considers/how his wife will best absorb the news
that she will be as like a divorcée/with three kids as
can be while still tangled in love. (p. 6, lines 1–6)

This view into the pressures of pre-deployment with a family delivers a stark reality for those audience members who have not lived it. In part two of the same poem, Corley further reveals the hardships of this experience: "After that, speeches hang in throats, but kisses do not substitute/because her heart's already growing cold and his lips/taste like adultery/or someone else's/wailing wall, recipient of tears and paper prayers/wedged into cracks where thousands of petitions went before/narrow graves" (p. 8, lines 24–29).

When considering the plight of veterans after war, Corley (2023) accurately describes their struggles. He shares insight into not just different experiences about struggle, but also about the tool used during the struggle. In his poem “Father Jacob Gets His Limp,” Corley illuminates both the physical and mental pain some veterans carry after war: “A limb of the soul, broken and refused, aches/when barometric pressures on the heart/recall a moral wounding that mistakes/a loss for an inflicted part” (p. 63, lines 1–4). In the next stanza of the poem, “Irradiating thought, the pain escapes/in waves of guilt or innocence dismayed,” Corley shows the mental strain some veterans may feel after returning from war (p. 63, lines 5–6). These experiences illuminate the diverse difficulties experienced by veterans. Corley utilizes the physical struggle as a metaphor to the mental strain caused by war. The mention of “barometric pressures” with the “limb of the soul” (p. 63), elicits imagery for veterans who may feel pain from orthopedic injuries that have long term impacts on the physical life, providing an easy comparison to the invisible injuries they may experience.

The unique experiences of the military affiliated community are often hard to communicate to those who haven’t experienced military service. In *Unwound: Poems from Enduring Wars*, Corley delivers a creative, introspective representation of the experiences before, during and after war. His poems provide a reflection of the military experience in a way that is artistic, but also obtainable for any reader.

My favorite poem is undoubtedly, “In-Country,” a 4-stanza reflection of the dangers of war. Using the imagery of a dog tag, Corley reveals the possibility of death and the promise of the “repatriation of remains” (p. 16, line 23). In the first stanza, he reflects on the location of one dog tag that veterans can easily relate to: “The dog-tag laced to the right boot/winks an S-O-S from its

unmarred/metal face whenever/the yellow sun/tungsten lamp or/Surefire personal illumination device...” (p. 16, lines 1–6). As a Marine Corps veteran, I still remember my dog tags and their purpose. Through Corley’s poem, however, I am returned to the feeling it creates when they serve their purpose in war: “The necklace tag reflects little/other than the promised/repatriation of remains/a covenant against stately graves” (p. 16, lines 21–24). Veterans and non-veterans alike will surely benefit from this type of imagery and reflection, as it will bring the military experience further into the light of understanding.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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