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UCSB Scholar, Conference Examine Value of Narrative Process

When comparative literature professor Susan Derwin taught her first writing workshop for student veterans at UC Santa Barbara, only three people signed up. Undaunted, she offered it again -- and again, and again. That was a year and a half ago, and the workshop has now become a regular course, offered quarterly, with an average enrollment of 10 students.

"The class is for veterans -- there are about 100 on campus -- and military dependents," said Derwin, who is also director of UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC). "Half are children or spouses of military members, and the other half are veterans. It's quite an alchemy of experiences."

That course forms the basis of a two-day conference sponsored by the IHC on Thursday and Friday, April 25-26. "Narrative-Making in the Aftermath of War" will focus on the capacity of narrative writing to help returning service members deal with the aftereffects of war and reintegrate into their communities. The conference, which is free and open to the public, is part of the IHC's yearlong program "Fallout: In the Aftermath of War." The series has examined the impact of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the soldiers who have fought in them.

The conference will begin at 9 a.m. at the IHC, 6046 Humanities and Social Sciences Building, and will include a series of panel discussions; readings by UCSB student veterans and their loved ones; and keynote addresses delivered by Judith Broder

and Carol Tanenbaum of The Soldiers Project, and Helene Moglen of UC Santa Cruz and Sheila Namir, a psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist. The talk by Broder and Tanenbaum is titled "Who Are You Now, Where Did We Meet Before? Reconnection in Family Life Through Shared Narratives." Moglen and Namir will discuss "Fighting for Words: A Creative Writing Workshop for Veterans."

Information about the IHC conference, including a complete schedule of events and participants, is available at <http://www.ihc.ucsb.edu/narrativemaking>.

The idea for the writing workshop -- and, hence the conference -- crystallized for Derwin after she published her book "Rage Is the Subtext -- Readings in Holocaust Literature and Film" (The Ohio University Press, 2012). In the book, Derwin explores the use of narrative as a means for Holocaust survivors to work through the rage -- seemingly unbearable at times -- that is oftentimes their legacy.

"Rage is an aftermath of traumatic experience that isn't so easily metabolized," Derwin explained. "It is really an unwieldy emotion, and one that's not been talked about much in Holocaust studies. Survivors often find themselves in a double bind -- their rage is about having been abandoned, isolated, and betrayed. Yet it is often directed at the very communities into which they want to integrate."

Derwin wrote about the process of transporting the experience from a non-verbal space inside to the outside -- the page -- and what that accomplishes for people -- how it makes manageable feelings and reactions that otherwise might not be. "I'm interested in how the narrative process unfolds," she explained. "In the case of survivors, testimonial writing often serves to create a narrative space where volatile emotions can be expressed in ways that do not alienate them from their community. Survivors talk about how there is no such thing as 'getting over' the past, but it is possible to learn to live in such a way that the past does not dominate present experience in negative ways. Narrative-making can help with this transformation."

As Derwin explored the value of narrative for Holocaust survivors, she considered how the process could be of use to veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who were now students at UCSB.

"It is my hope that the writing workshop gives veterans a useful tool to help them explore the complex and varied emotions they feel about their military experiences," she said. "At the same time, because the workshop focuses on writing, it is not therapy. The meetings are confidential, and much is shared in the conversation, but

I approach them as a writing teacher and as someone interested in learning about what these young men and women have experienced."

Student veterans and military dependents from Derwin's narrative writing courses will be reading their work at the conference at 4 p.m. on Thursday, April 25, and at 11 a.m. on Friday, April 26.

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