

Book Review

Out of the woods: A journey through depression and anxiety.

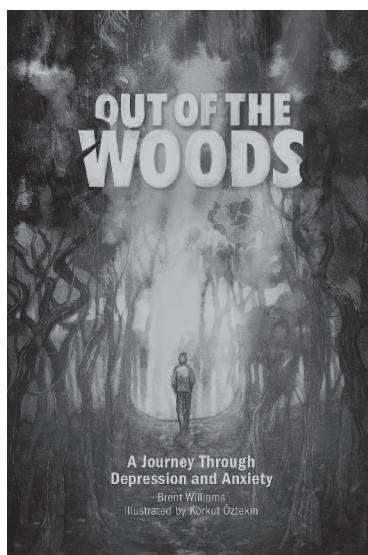
By Brent Williams and Korkut Öztekin. (2017).

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Brent Williams has, along with his talented illustrator, Korkut Öztekin, brilliantly portrayed an honest account of his journey through depression and anxiety, in a way that is accessible to the lay person keen on seeking understanding of these very prevalent issues. The intended audience of this graphic novel is those suffering from depression and anxiety, along with their loved ones, as well as mental health workers and those working in the broader helping professions. It is targeted at adults, including young adults — although I wondered if some women would not identify as well with this graphic novel, partly because of the style and partly because the protagonist is a man. The graphic story-telling is easy to understand and for someone like me who is quite imagery-oriented, it gives a felt sense for the reader, more than words alone possibly could. I found the presentation very powerful without an over-

reliance on words. This style could also appeal to teenagers, as it is an easy and reasonable read.

The beginning of the book gives a pictorial description of the emotional (and physical) place in which the author finds himself, with a linking of the title “Out of the woods” to page six, where the concept and terrible sense of being lost “deep in the woods” is made explicit. Through the combination of graphic and written content, the simple physiological explanation of how depression works in the brain enables the reader to gain an understanding of how the brain is affected by stress.

An early segment seems to provide the suggestion of a Divine intervention which enabled the author to be free of his fear and anxiety of death. However, the author shares the realisation that for him even the balm of his spiritual experience was not a permanent or complete solution to his depression, and so the search continued.

The main theme of the author’s journey through his depression and anxiety begins with

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references to many contributing factors, starting with childhood trauma, implied sexual abuse and low self-esteem. The story continues with descriptions of his symptoms of depression and anxiety, his cancer diagnosis, and then develops into an exploration of how he processed and overcame them; how he found his way “out of the woods”. I found it interesting to note what types of healing the author sought, which treatments seemed to help him and which did not, and I was especially interested as a psychotherapist in the challenges experienced by the author in seeking out different types of therapists. When he found one that made sense for him, who he was finally able to trust and who offered what felt like the right kind of support to explore his childhood, it was a relief. The description about what to be aware of in making a choice of therapy and therapist was useful.

Throughout the author’s journey, the character of the Old Man appears alongside the protagonist. It is unclear who this old man is to him. This vagueness leaves it up to each reader to attribute qualities and meaning for themselves; whether he is God, a father, teacher, Conscience, or something or somebody else. There is also an implication, through the drawings, of a sense of good and evil; where depression is depicted in terms of death and evil (darkness), and the mysterious older man and the last therapist as good (light). Perhaps the author and illustrator’s use of the “light and dark” theme was an attempt to capture the binary or absolute aspects of the experience and nature of serious depression.

The ending provides a succinct summary of what helped the author to focus on being and remaining well, and the relationships he repaired, as he made his journey “out of the woods”. In the last pages of the book, the author offers an invitation to the reader to seek help and to begin their own journey towards recovering, with a sense of hope.

This is an intensely personal and deeply emotional story of the author’s journey through depression, anxiety, life traumas and challenges. While some may critique the style of this story as an unusual one for this kind of content, and not an overtly academic one, I am of the opinion that it provides an openness of expression, an accessibility not easily achieved by writing alone, and offers the reader a tangible sense of the possible impact and suffering experienced through the illness of depression and anxiety, as well as plenty of information and inspiration.

I would recommend this beautifully presented graphic novel to *Ata* readers, as well as a general audience, including clients.



Brigitte Viljoen works in private practice at TherapyNZ, in Mt Eden, and also works in Glenfield and West Auckland. Brigitte is a psychotherapist who has experience working with a wide range of issues, including anxiety, depression, grief and loss, relationship difficulties, family dynamics and trauma. Brigitte sees adults (individuals and couples), children, teenagers and families for long- and short-term psychotherapy. Brigitte is also a research assistant at Auckland University of Technology, has submitted a co-authored journal article and is preparing another. Contact details: therapynz@gmail.com .