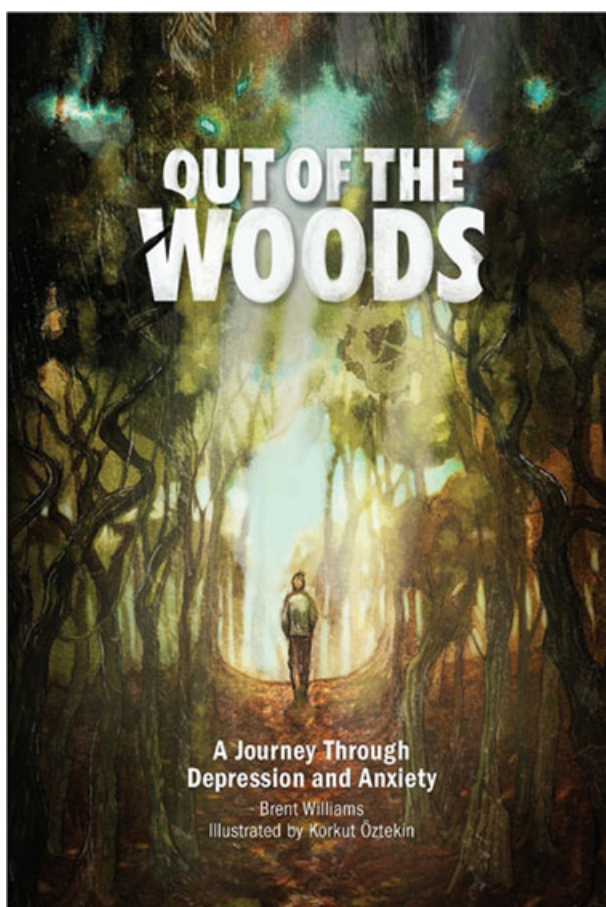


# OUT OF THE WOODS: A JOURNEY THROUGH DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Brent Williams | Korkut Öztekin

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Brent Williams's autobiographical work, beautifully illuminated by Korkut Öztekin's often ethereal and fairytale-esque artwork, is a touching and heartfelt account of his personal struggle with depression and anxiety.

As I read *Out of the Woods*, it was to the section (pp. 80–97) in which the author journeys deep into the forest of his childhood with the support and guidance of Lisa, the therapist whose approach finally fits with him, that I kept returning. Williams is not afraid to confront the demons—indeed, the traumas—that lie underneath the

symptoms of depression and anxiety. Author and illustrator bring to life a harshly critical, abusive father, a threatening home environment, and a teenager desperate to escape who ultimately resigns himself to a false self in early adulthood.

We are in a time where social and cultural taboos around mental health are rightly being challenged. We are comfortable naming the symptoms (“depression,” “anxiety”), but we are still too afraid to name the causes; as Williams acknowledges, “it was easier to believe ‘work’ was the cause and ‘burnout’ the result” (p. 92). This is echoed in his encounters with therapists before Lisa, who had “avoided my childhood . . . like it was unfashionable to talk about it. They only seemed interested in the here and now” (p. 92). In the political climate in which I find myself as a trainee psychotherapist in the UK, it was impossible for this part not to remind me of the current trend for “here and now”-based therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and the pressure to apply therapeutic “quick fixes” that cost as little as possible (we live in a time of austerity, after all) and return people as quickly as possible to economic productivity. As the supportive friend character who appears throughout the book acknowledges, “they want the old you back, even if it was killing you” (p. 102). In seeing therapy simply as a means to restore people to a state of utilitarian functionality, however, we could miss so many powerful opportunities to reimagine and transform lives, as Williams’s road out of his own personal woods depicts.



As a crisis worker, I would also acknowledge that, while crisis can be painful and difficult, it can also be a moment of realisation and a catalyst for growth. *Out of the Woods* is not just a story about the protagonist having an illness for a period of time and then picking up where he left off. Although there is a positive message of hope and healing within this narrative, reflected in the brighter hues in the illustrations towards the end of the book, it is clear that Williams made considerable sacrifices, notably in his family relationships, to pursue his transformative journey. Williams’s process is perhaps an example in the field of psychotherapy of what the “Slow Food” movement has been to food—it requires time, effort, and human care; no McTherapy can satisfy this kind of hunger. As his friend acknowledges, “you can’t think your way out of here” (p. 57).



I felt a bit ambivalent about the author's assertion of his depression as "an illness . . . a disease" (p. 141) (although he does acknowledge that "chasing endless diagnoses for a multitude of symptoms") ultimately led him nowhere. At the beginning of the book, which details his spiral into depression, he outlines his resistance to taking antidepressants—a choice which, to his doctor and even his supportive friend, seems baffling, such is the power the biochemical model has over our beliefs about mental health. It often seems we have bought wholesale into the idea that we can reduce depression and other states of distress to a matter of brain chemicals that need to be regulated and balanced, so I found myself almost cheering, willing him on to keep resisting this seductively simplistic explanation of his experiences.

Although he does ultimately accept his depression as an illness, when I look at the profound effect it had on his life, both mentally and physically, I can absolutely see why his experience of depression would have felt that way to him. Everything he experiences, from his physical symptoms and ailments to his dark thoughts and emotions are interconnected through the book. More importantly, I could understand why it would feel important to someone who had walked this long and lonely road that their own distress and suffering should absolutely be treated equally to a physical illness. We all must explain our own experiences in the way that feels right to us, which is exactly what Williams has done here. It is his understanding of his struggles, complemented by Öztekin's sensitively drawn yet expressive illustrations, that serve to highlight the narrative and provide it with an emotional landscape.

I would highly recommend that psychotherapists and mental health professionals at any level read this book. Its graphic novel style makes it accessible yet impactful. It was a refreshing respite for me as a psychotherapy student who often finds herself buried in large volumes of theory; *Out of the Woods* put me right back to the first day I decided to embark on this journey towards being a therapist. As Williams's life burst into full colour, so did my own weary student's mind, limping as I was towards the Christmas break in my first semester when I read the book. We must ourselves be careful—especially in training, when the process can feel so very overwhelming—not to get lost in the “theoretical woods” and to keep the client, the real human being in front of us, front and centre.

I felt privileged to have had this glimpse into the author's journey, which no doubt has still more subtleties, twists and turns than either he or the illustrator were able to fit into the book—perhaps a reminder that we must remain aware as therapists of what we do not, and possibly cannot, know another's experience. *Out of the Woods* is a powerful reminder that real people's stories, real journeys, and real transformations are every bit as important as the theories that shape and inform our practice.

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