

MEN WRITING
EATING DISORDERS

‘I read this fascinating study in a single sitting. Heike Bartel’s *Men Writing Eating Disorders* probes a little-known but devastating issue with superlative care: illuminating the link between autobiographical writing in English and German, and attempts by men to chart their experiences of eating disorders; but also showing the vital role that literature can play in uncovering this largely taboo illness. This text brings to our attention a striking modern literary corpus and shows what a powerful tool literary research can be in the growing field of Medical Humanities.’ - **Karen Leeder, Professor of Modern German Literature, Fellow of New College, University of Oxford, UK**

‘This important book challenges typical perspectives on eating disorders. It reveals the traps and opportunities in literature and language to represent or misrepresent those who suffer this distressing condition—men as well as women. *Men Writing Eating Disorders* unlocks an important door to a more inclusive gender perception.’ - **Professor Paul Crawford, Institute of Mental Health at the University of Nottingham, UK**

‘As an area often neglected and under-recognised, this book provides an in-depth look at male eating disorders in a way that blends psychology, arts and the voice of those who have lived with an eating disorder. A truly unique gem that captures a part of the eating disorder experience that is missing from many accounts already out there. ‘ - **Dr Una Foye, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King’s College London, UK**

‘This important book brings a transdisciplinary gaze to understanding eating disorders in men. The exploration of these experiences through the lens of 21 personal narratives illuminates the cultural, social and clinical implications of this neglected area. The gendered construction of eating disorders, the process of autobiographical writing and the links with illness narratives are all expertly discussed. The book advances the field of medical and health humanities, and will be of interest to literary scholars, narrative and identity researchers, and clinicians working with eating disorders.’ - **Mike Slade, Professor of Mental Health Recovery & Social Inclusion at the University of Nottingham, UK**

‘Heike Bartel’s *Men Writing Eating Disorders: Autobiographical Writing and Illness Experience in English and German Narratives* offers an exemplary model how the humanities - I prefer the term “the human sciences” - can engage with and, indeed, teach the nomological (“law-like”) sciences and the practical pedagogy of biomedicine... [The book] will go a long way in teaching physicians, healthcare systems, and - perhaps most importantly - “individuals who are living with an eating disorder”

and “also [their] brothers, fathers, friends, and lovers” that the pain and suffering that imbues their lives are real, command acknowledgment, and mandate therapies and treatment... I can think of no better achievement for the humanities than to contribute to our general well-being in the way that *Men Writing Eating Disorders* does with such mastery. It is a book that has the potential to enlarge our compassion, to learn from the suffering and joy of others, and to discover strategies to alleviate pain and foster a good life (the work of *phronesis*). It is a book that will make our world better.’ - **Ronald Schleifer, George Lynn Cross Research Professor of English and Adjunct Professor in Medicine, University of Oklahoma, USA**

This page intentionally left blank

MEN WRITING EATING DISORDERS

Autobiographical Writing and
Illness Experience in English and
German Narratives

HEIKE BARTEL

University of Nottingham, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

© 2021 Heike Bartel. Published under exclusive licence by
Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. No responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of information contained in the text, illustrations or advertisements. The opinions expressed in these chapters are not necessarily those of the Author or the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83909-923-6 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83909-920-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83909-922-9 (Epub)



ISOQAR
REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the staff of the eating disorders charity FirstStepsED (<https://firststepsed.co.uk/>) whose admirable dedication, knowledge and creativity is encouraging more and more people of all genders, ages and backgrounds to voice their experiences of eating disorders.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvi</i>
Introduction	1
1. Eating Disorders and Men	9
1.1. The Corpus	9
1.2. Classifications of Eating Disorders	14
1.2.1. Anorexia Nervosa	15
1.2.2. Bulimia Nervosa	17
1.2.3. Binge Eating Disorder	19
1.2.4. Muscle Dysmorphia	20
1.3. Eating Disorders in Men	21
2. Constructing Eating Disorders	25
2.1. A 'Girls' Illness'	25
2.2. Language Matters	28
2.3. Gendering Illness	31
2.4. Feminist Scholarship and Eating Disorders	32

3.	Written on the Body	35
3.1.	Sport and Exercise	40
3.1.1.	'Real Sport for Real Men'	40
3.1.2.	Shirts and Skins	43
3.1.3.	Excessive Exercise	48
3.1.4.	Positive Elements of Exercise	51
3.2.	Sex and Intimacy	52
3.2.1.	'Slim = Attractive'	53
3.2.2.	Relationships with 'Anna' and 'Wendy'	59
3.2.3.	'Sins of the Flesh'	65
3.2.4.	Pleasure and Fulfilment	68
4.	Autobiographical Writing	69
4.1.	Writing the Self: Through the Lens of Literary Scholarship	69
4.1.1.	'Autobiographical Writing' Versus 'Autobiography'	71
4.1.2.	'Memoir Boom'	74
4.1.3.	Memory	77
4.1.4.	Food Memories	80
4.1.5.	Family Food Histories	81
4.2.	Ventures Outside Autobiographical Writing	87
4.3.	Paratexts	93
4.3.1.	Images	96
4.3.2.	A Hunger Artist?	105
4.3.3.	Forewords, Afterwords and Interjections	110

Contents	xi
5. Writing for Healthcare	115
5.1. Illness Narrative	115
5.2. Narratives and Healthcare	118
5.3. Narratives in Healthcare Education and Training	121
5.4. New Additions to the Corpus of Narrative Medicine	124
5.5. Men Writing Experiences of Treatment	128
<i>Conclusion</i>	141
<i>Bibliography</i>	145
<i>Index</i>	163

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Cover: 'Panic Heart' (<i>Panikherz</i> ; Stuckrad-Barre, 2016).	97
Fig. 2. Cover: <i>Skinny Boy. A Young Man's Battle and Triumph over Anorexia</i> (Grahl, 2007).	100
Fig. 3. Cover: <i>Luft nach unten. Wie ich mit meiner Magersucht zusammenkam und mit ihr lebte.</i> ('Room For Less. 'How I Got Together With My Anorexia and Lived With Her') (Boks, 2019).	102
Fig. 4. 'Florian': <i>A Story to Tell, or: Regarding Male Eating Disorders</i> (Rakoš & de Theije, 2020).	124
Fig. 5. 'Ramon': <i>A Story to Tell, or: Regarding Male Eating Disorders</i> (Rakoš & de Theije, 2020).	125

This page intentionally left blank

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heike Bartel is Associate Professor in German in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at The University of Nottingham (UK). She has published extensively on eighteenth-century and contemporary literature and poetry, women's writing and narrative perspectives. Her interdisciplinary research focusses on gender and narratives of trauma and illness. She has led several AHRC- and Wellcome-funded interdisciplinary projects on eating disorders in men in collaboration with clinicians, researchers, artists and male experts by experience and supported by the Health Humanities research group and the Institute of Mental Health at The University of Nottingham.

A literary and cultural scholar by training, she is also well informed in clinical research in the field of eating disorders in men and experienced in developing and delivering arts-based training on the topic for charities, clinicians and students of Medicine and Healthcare Sciences. Outcomes of her projects include creative training material and tools for primary care, accredited and endorsed by the Royal Colleges of General Practitioners and Nursing and supported by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the charities Mental Health First Aid England, FirstStepsED, MaleVoiceED and the German Consulting Centre for Eating Disorders in Cologne ('Landesfachstelle für Essstörungen NRW').

Website: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/hungry-for-words/index.aspx>

Twitter: @ConsiderMaleEDs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some sharp minds and sensitive souls have helped me in writing this book. I would like to thank especially Una Foye, Elizabeth Boa, Russell Delderfield, Dirk Götsche, and Fiona Frost.

My special thanks go to Richard Vytنيorgu whose insights into literature and food writing has spurred on this book and associated teaching projects, and to my friend and favourite critic Anne Simon.

My thanks also go to the institutions that enabled this project through financial support: The University of Nottingham and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

To Chris and Kirsten Done I express – as always – my love and gratitude for their patience with me; you are my heroes.

Triggers: Some people may find passages about eating disorders and self-harm quoted in this book triggering.

Translations: None of the German narratives cited in this book have been translated into English yet. All translations are by the author. The translated titles of German books that are not published in English are given in inverted commas, not italics.

INTRODUCTION

‘Well, first of all, you don’t have anorexia because men don’t get anorexia’. This is the sentence ‘Jim’, a protagonist in one of the books at the centre of this study hears from his doctor when he approaches him for help with his problematic eating (Kohl, 2009, p. 128). ‘Jim’ *has* anorexia and the narrative outlining his struggle of living with an eating disorder and getting help for it, as a man, is one of 21 texts this book explores. The underresearched and underrepresented topic lies at the centre of this study: eating disorders in men and boys. For it is not only women and girls who get eating disorders.

Eating disorders are situated at the complex interface of biology, medicine, culture and society.¹ They involve a multitude of possible factors predisposing an individual, whether male or female, to the illness, as well as precipitating and maintaining it. How eating disorders are understood varies depending on the particular perspective of the individual or discipline that engages them, be it personal – as someone who has an eating disorder or looks after someone with the illness – be it medical, historical or cultural.

This book aims to draw together such perspectives on men and their problematic relationships with food and eating. It includes throughout, in the terms ‘men’ and ‘male’, all who identify with the pronoun he/him. We approach the topic through a method that looks, for the first time, at eating disorders in men through the lens of international literary narratives

authored by men with experience of living with anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder or other subtypes of an eating disorder. These men write in very different ways about their experiences. This book shows how the content, form and presentation of these narratives not only express highly personal views but also how these insights into the illness can add to and shape the understanding of it in other contexts.

The book is written for a readership across the fields: scholars from the humanities, especially from the philological disciplines such as English and American Studies, German and Romance Studies, who are interested in narratives and redefining the genre demarcations of writing one's life in autobiography or illness narrative; researchers with an interest in gender studies and critical socio-cultural assessment of illness and masculinity through the lens of food and eating; readers keen to explore the nexus of arts and humanities and science within the disciplines of Health Humanities and Medical Humanities; and healthcare professionals and clinical researchers with an interest in personal narratives as a tool for shaping training in and treatment of eating disorders. Introducing narratives that touch upon many aspects of life, *Men Writing Eating Disorders* also hopes to gain the interest of a more general public readership. Such readers may be drawn to the book because of personal experiences and should be aware that some quotations from the texts are as raw and piercing as the illness at its centre and may present triggers.

The detailed readings of the 21 book-length narratives in our study take the reader into the worlds of men who have an eating disorder, for example: anorexic 16-year-old 'Gary' and 43-year-old 'Christian'; morbidly obese 'Tommy' and male model 'Ron', both have binge eating disorder; 'Brian' with 'bigorexia' (muscle dysmorphic disorder) injecting himself with steroids in the gyms of Las Vegas, 'Benjamin' living with bulimia in Berlin, 'Bernhard' trying to get treatment for

anorexia in a small town in Austria, ‘John’ whose eating spirals out of control when starting university in Leicester; ‘Aron’ who is recovering but still struggling, ‘Gary’ who considers himself ‘healed’ and ‘Michael’ who will die from the effects of his eating disorder two years after completing his book. The narratives portray men who suffer from depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, alcohol dependency or drug addiction, in addition to an eating disorder. Importantly, they present individuals who are living with an eating disorder but are also brothers, fathers, friends, and lovers; students, accountants, teachers, journalists, stand-up comedians, a protestant pastor, a successful pop star, and, importantly, writers of their own life stories.

As a literary scholar, the author cannot speak with the authority of a clinician or medical researcher on the illness. However, the author *can* speak with authority on the value of personal narratives and the role of literate in expressing, learning about and teaching how eating disorders are experienced in their various individual forms and stages. For literature – like no other medium – allows articulation of, offers insight into, and promotes reflection upon life with all of its orders and dis-orders.

A critical reading of the narratives offers a bridge between the arts and science that is suited to the topic of eating disorders when addressing the highly gendered questions of who eats what, when, how, how much, why and why not. Nuanced literary study ‘doesn’t exclude other disciplines, it allows us to use them while maintaining the integrity of our own’ (Petrey, 1998, p. 16). Scholars have emphasised the importance of literary narratives in asking how psychiatric illness can be explored with regards to ‘the meanings it carries both for individuals and the social and cultural world they inhabit’ (Wood, 2013, p.19) and the potential of their use in training healthcare professionals, for example in programmes of ‘Narrative Medicine’ (Charon, 2006).

Men Writing Eating Disorders brings together the socio-cultural, political and aesthetic, as well as the medical, psychological and historical aspects inherent in the varied representations of the illness at its centre. This book draws on and goes beyond literary scholarship in showing how critical engagement with narrative texts provides a prism for a complex array of implicated factors and can enhance health and medical practice. The narratives explored here bring written lived experiences of illness, treatment, recovery or relapse into relation with healthcare practice and research. This attempt contributes to bridging the perceived gap between arts and humanities and sciences and can inform interdisciplinary scholarship by highlighting not just *that* but also *how* literature can make a contribution to healthcare.

The texts are situated in the historical and theoretical context of autobiographical writing and the new types of writing emerging from it, such as illness narrative. Recent years have seen an increase in writings about personal experiences of health and illness that G. Thomas Couser and others have read as a ‘memoir boom’ (Couser, 2009, p. 2). Our study will explore this phenomenon that has seen – and is still seeing – an increase in men’s autobiographical accounts of eating disorders. The corpus of this study surveys 21 autobiographical texts from English- and German-language contexts in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria that span nearly 50 years, from the 1970s to 2019, with 6 of them alone having been published from 2018 onwards, showing an increased interest, although hardly a ‘boom’, in the still underrepresented topic.

The 21 texts in English and German express unique and very different illness experiences. Yet comparisons between them also serve to highlight shared themes and narrative patterns across linguistic and national boundaries. The six texts in German do not only show the relevance of the topic outside the United States and the United Kingdom but also

raise a more general awareness of the transculturality of the topic by comparing experiences and ways of writing. This also sharpens a sensitivity towards transcultural elements in other texts such as the two written by American authors with a family background in migration, Frank Bruni's *Born Round* (2009) and Brian Cuban's *Shattered Image* (2013). Research that explores texts from other language traditions, especially outside the Western world would make a very interesting and worthwhile future project.

Due to public but also medical perceptions of eating disorders as 'female only' and other misconceptions around masculinity and mental health, there are still very few accounts of male experiences of eating disorders. This is despite reports that the number of men and boys with eating disorders is rising in the Western world (Marsh, 2017; Foye, 2018). It is only slowly being recognised by the public but also by many healthcare professionals that the many complex biological, genetic and cultural factors that can lead to developing and maintaining an eating disorder also affect men and boys. These factors include the pressure to adhere to gender-stereotypical body images so frequently mentioned regarding women and girls. Pressure from the media to look a certain way is only one among the many complex reasons why an individual may develop an eating disorder, though, and it is a factor that is – perhaps surprisingly – not particularly foregrounded in the 21 texts, echoing research findings that emphasise factors such as peer context over media influence (Forney, Holland, & Keel, 2012).

Hindered by gendered socio-cultural misconceptions of eating disorders, external and internalised stereotypes and healthcare systems that are historically focussed on women and girls, men often end up in a position that makes it difficult for them to speak out about body dissatisfaction, mental health problems in general, and eating disorders in particular.

As a consequence, men's eating disorders often remain 'underdiagnosed, undertreated, and misunderstood' (Strother, Lemberg, Stanford, & Thurberville, 2012) and, thus, remain under the radar both of healthcare and of researchers and the general public. 'I couldn't even explain it to myself, let alone some imposing bloke/blokette sporting a white coat and a stethoscope', is how Dave Chawner describes the problem in one of the narratives, *Weight Expectations. One Man's Recovery from Anorexia* (2018, p. 51).

Whilst the number of quantitative clinical studies in the field has increased over recent years, this book addresses the pressing need to conduct more research from a different angle: one that focusses on the experiences and thoughts of men and boys. There is a current lack of insight into the complexity of eating disorders in males from a personal and broader socio-cultural angle. Such research is needed to develop greater awareness and understanding among healthcare practitioners, the general public and, importantly, the men and boys themselves who are affected.

This book approaches the topic in five chapters. Chapter One, 'Eating Disorders and Men', outlines the different classifications of eating disorders with regards to males and introduces the corpus of 21 texts. Chapter Two, 'Constructing Eating Disorders', discusses the highly gendered constructedness of eating disorders as a 'girls' illness' that affects both clinical and socio-cultural practices. The chapter broadens the perspective on the 'construction' of illness in general. An excursus into the well-established field of 'Feminist Scholarship and Eating Disorders' highlights the advances made here and their use to drive research on eating disorders in men, particularly with regards to literary writing. Chapter Three, 'Written on the Body', explores the complex relationship between eating disorders, the male body and embodiments of 'manly' behaviours against the backdrop of new and old

concepts of masculinity. It discusses both the prescriptive and limiting nature of such concepts, as well as the potential to challenge and transgress them, which the chapter will explore with reference to some of the narratives. Representations of the thematic complexes of sex, and intimate relationships, and sport, male bonding in team sports and excessive exercise in the texts will link the theoretical discussion to individual examples. Chapter Four, ‘Autobiographical Writing’, engages with the extensive scholarship on the traditional literary genre of autobiography and its evolving subtypes. The close relationship between literary form and content, the *how* and the *what* of writing, will drive this chapter, which also looks into other elements such as the importance of childhood memories, the role of publishers, the use of photos and the booming market for autobiographies in influencing how the narratives in our corpus are written and read. Chapter Five, ‘Writing for Healthcare’, makes concrete suggestions regarding how the narratives, mediated through the tools of literary scholarship, can contribute to healthcare. It situates the discussion within the interdisciplinary context of scholarship driven by the Health Humanities and Medical Humanities. Concentrating the focus on the genre of illness narrative, the chapter pinpoints the role of writing for recovery, both as process and as outcome.

NOTE

1. For a general introduction to eating disorders see, for example, the website of the UK eating disorders charity Beat (n.d.). For clinicians, see also: *New to Eating Disorders* (Morris & Nahman, 2020).

This page intentionally left blank