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# George Amabile on War, Trauma, the Creative Process, and His Latest Collection Martial Music

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Liana Cusmano's interview with poet George Amabile focuses on his prize-winning 2018 collection *Martial Music* and the art of writing in general. He offers insights on the poetic process, how to research and produce a collection of poems. Amabile's poetry is inspired by what he has experienced or witnessed. He talks about dealing with war and trauma. He shares his frustration with daily life getting in the way of the creative process. "Life is the subject and the inspirational/ motivational source of our work, but it also sucks up our time and frustrates our ability to give our unstinted attention to our creative efforts," says George Amabile.

# George Amabile on War, Trauma, the Creative Process, and His Latest Collection *Martial Music*<sup>1</sup>

Liana Cusmano

*Abstract:* Liana Cusmano's interview with poet George Amabile focuses on his prize-winning 2018 collection *Martial Music* and the art of writing in general. He offers insights on the poetic process, how to research and produce a collection of poems. Amabile's poetry is inspired by what he has experienced or witnessed. He talks about dealing with war and trauma. He shares his frustration with daily life getting in the way of the creative process. "Life is the subject and the inspirational/motivational source of our work, but it also sucks up our time and frustrates our ability to give our unstinted attention to our creative efforts," says George Amabile.

*Keywords:* War, Trauma, Humanity, Creativity, Poetry, Cusmano, Amabile

George Amabile has published ten books. He is the winner of numerous national and international awards. His poetry, fiction and non-fiction has been published in Canada, the USA, Europe, South America, Australia and New Zealand in anthologies, magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker Book of Poems*, *Harper's*, *Botteghe Oscure*, *The Globe & Mail*, *The Malahat Review*, *Saturday Night*, and *Canadian Literature*. He is a three-time winner of the Bressani Award, including in 2018 for his collection *Martial Music* (Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2016).

**Liana Cusmano:** *What is your personal connection to the themes you explore through your poems? Are these drawn from experience?*

**George Amabile:** No, and yes, or maybe. I never experienced military combat, but one summer afternoon I was with my younger brother, riding our bikes into town, when he was hit by a truck and killed. As an adult, one of my closest friends who served in

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was previously published in *Accenti Magazine* on December 20, 2018 (<https://accenti.ca/george-amabile-on-war-trauma-the-creative-process-and-his-latest-collection-martial-music-by-liana-cusmano>).

Vietnam and witnessed the violent death of friends, suffered a symptomology similar to mine, though I did not understand it was PTS/PTSD. One of the things I learned from writing this book was that for many years I had been struggling with the psychological and emotional repercussions of my brother's death.

**Cusmano:** *How does your life experience complement or intrude on your process as a poet?*

**Amabile:** For most writers of lyrical or personal poetry, this is a paradox. Life is the subject and the inspirational/motivational source of our work, but it also sucks up our time and frustrates our ability to give our unstinted attention to our creative efforts. Most of my poems are based on things that happened to me or that I witnessed and thought worth writing about. But the demands on my time—from my job, my family, house, car, friends, etc.—have often been so great as to be overwhelming. There have been periods of up to three years when I wrote nothing but a few notebook scribbles and letters to friends. I guess the necessary talent here is the ability to balance the life and the work. Writing Programs should, in my view, include training in time management, but most do not, and that is unfortunate. Many writers with important stories to tell succumb to the tide of things to do and give up the struggle altogether.

**Cusmano:** *Many of the poems in the collection are understandably graphic. How did translating soldiers' lived experiences affect you as a writer?*

**Amabile:** Given my brother's death—he died in my arms on the grass at the edge of what is now US Interstate 1—I wasn't entirely shocked by what my research revealed. But in some of the poems, I had to work with the words of the soldiers instead of writing my own, and that took a great deal of careful attention, especially to the rhythm, usage, dialect, speech pattern, etc. of the speaker whose words I was re-arranging into lines and incorporating into a sequence with the voices and speaking styles of other soldiers. As a writer, I felt stretched, out of my comfort zone, but also invigorated by the desire to produce a readable, credible result that still had poetic force.

**Cusmano:** *Can you discuss the process of researching, writing and putting together this collection?*

**Amabile:** I had already read dozens of books on Vietnam and the Gulf Wars when I came across a series of articles in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, which became the basis for the long poem “Lethal Warriors.” The next step was deciding on the form. I chose the “heroic couplet” but used a looser, slant-rhymed version to suggest that the events I was describing were not entirely “heroic,” and often the opposite. The other long poem used materials from a book about PTSD in veterans of the Vietnam War. I took excerpts from the taped interviews and re-worked them into short free verse poems which I arranged and re-arranged into a sequence of increasing intensity. Other poems in the book provided a larger context for the war poems and attempted to present a variety of perspectives that included other historical periods (“History Lesson”), Politics (“Big Picture”) and the interpersonal realm as well (“Night Window,” “The Home Front”). I’ve travelled and/or lived for several months in areas that were once part of the Roman Empire—Italy, Turkey, Croatia, Syria—and kept journals which I used as memory prompts to give me images I could work with to produce what I hoped would be accurate settings for some of the poems.

**Cusmano:** *How does a poetry collection about war complement or differ from a narrative film about war? About Vietnam?*

**Amabile:** A narrative film about war, even a modest independent one, requires a significant investment of capital to produce and distribute. The financial community is the bastion of a culture whose principle beliefs (profit, competition, profit) call for decisions that minimize risk. For a movie to succeed it must reach a large, paying audience. In most places that audience believes that its country is the International Good Guy and that its troops are all heroes. As a result, the vast majority of war films, even those which attempt to approximate the reality of combat, do not risk violating the patriotic beliefs of their prospective audience. For instance, I don’t know of any film that gives an accurate account, or any account, of the My Lai Massacre.

A book of poems has no such encumbrances and can present a very different understanding of war, how it changes those who fight and severely affects even those who do not, destroying millions of lives and making a few of us humans (mostly men) very rich. Poems are also read and experienced in a more intimate way than images on a screen. Poems evolve in the imaginative con-

sciousness of the reader who must provide images to fit the words. This is a necessarily more personal experience. On the other hand, nothing communicated only in words can compete with the powerful impact provided by sound and sight on a big screen. But words leave room for and actually invite the reader to pause and think, while a slam bam war film does not. In this sense it might be argued that a book of poems about war can have a deeper and more lasting influence on a reader than the heavily dramatized, high production values of a war film, which often carry elements of fantasy and escapism.

**Cusmano:** *Your poems attest to the humanity of the people who become soldiers and of the civilians they are trained to kill. How can we learn to recognize that humanity for ourselves and thereby reduce hatred and violence?*

**Amabile:** A difficult question. I'll start by saying a few words about the way we use the word "humanity." It is almost always applied to those qualities and characteristics we like and are proud of. The result is support for a subtext which intimates that those qualities we call evil are not human. In fact, we call things like genocide, rape, slavery etc., inhuman; we call cruelty inhumane. But these are human acts and behaviours too. They are done by humans to humans, and the first thing we need to face up to is the fact that we are all capable of doing terrible things. Good and Evil are not forces that exist outside of us, but are the result of choices we make as individual beings. It is dangerous to succumb to the attractive belief that we, Canadians or Americans, Chinese or Russians, are the good guys and everything we do, however violent or destructive, is right because our cause and our intentions are good. We must also learn to extend the parameters of our sense of personal identity from family, city, province, country, race and religion to *Homo Sapiens* on planet Earth and beyond. This is uncomfortable, unfashionable, unpopular and carries the risk of ostracism by one's peers. But until we recognize that all humans are fundamentally the same animal, the same species with the same basic consciousness and that we are all facing the same threats to our survival from the environment we have seriously degraded and from the insanely effective weapons we have developed to annihilate each other, we will continue to delude ourselves about where we are headed and what the outcome will be.

**Cusmano:** *Would you say that the media and our politicians constitute an obstacle or a conduit to such an awareness? If so, how?*

**Amabile:** My first impulse was to say, simply, obstacle, period, and end the discussion. But I realized that I was, once again, in the choke hold of a contradiction. For a long time, I have felt little but frustration, disbelief, astonishment and outrage about our public discourse and the national/international policies it supports. But to withdraw from the discussion is not helpful either. So, I'll say my piece as well as I can in a short space. On balance, the media and the politicians are answerable to corporate advertisers and campaign donors. They are not accountable to their audience, consumers or voters. It is in their interest to keep things as they are. It is in the interest of the two percent who control most of the wealth to keep things as they are. The easiest way to do so is to convince everyone that we are threatened by enemies and must therefore accept oppressive, unjust and unreasonably aggressive policies both at home and abroad in the name of national security. To see other cultures, religions, political systems, as having a shared humanity and a shared need to deal with planetary issues would require a completely different set of values and a much more open mind set, which those in power are not willing, or perhaps not able, to initiate. War is supposed to be a last resort, but it goes on all the time, all over the world. And I've heard more than one respected intellectual argue that war is an acceptable and irreversible part of the human condition, that it has technological and economic benefits that outweigh its negative aspects. [US President Donald] Trump's recent refusal to sanction Saudi Arabia's murder and dismemberment of a US resident and journalist was largely based on his desire to protect billions of dollars in arms sales and Saudi investments in the US economy. Another disturbing aspect of politics and media which Trump has brought into focus is a tendency not only to tolerate but to applaud and admire deception employed for personal or political gain. Fraud is illegal, but it is not illegal for politicians to lie to the public. Under these conditions, democracy and meaningful discourse become untenable and the likelihood of a change in our awareness unlikely without some kind of planetary disaster.