



**SO
MUCH
MORE
THAN A
HEADACHE**

**UNDERSTANDING
MIGRAINE
THROUGH
LITERATURE**

**EDITED BY
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Kathleen J. O'Shea (editor). *So Much More than a Headache: Understanding Migraine Through Literature*. Kent State University Press, 2020, 232 pp., ISBN: 978-1606354032 \$34.95, paperback

As a disability studies and medical humanities scholar, I'd like to think that I know that migraines are more than "just a headache." But the truth is that I've never had a migraine, and it's hard for me to imagine what migraines are even like. As a child, my mother suffered from severe migraines so bad that she was hesitant to even mention the word "headache" for fear it would bring one on. And even though I waited in fear that I would develop migraines when I got my first period, as she did, the migraines never came.

Although migraines are not part of my life, I still say the word "migraine" frequently. I have many students who miss class, sometimes apologetically emailing the next day because they couldn't look at a screen long enough to let me know they would be absent. I have friends who duck out of events last minute. I can't add wine to any dish I serve my mother since it's a trigger for her. But I've never really understood what migraines were until this anthology.

Edited by Kathleen J. O'Shea, *So Much More than a Headache: Understanding Migraine Through Literature*, examines migraines through literary, philosophical, medical, and other lenses, shedding light on why it is so important to move past the "just a headache" idea." In fact, as O'Shea writes in one of the introductions, migraines are "associated with substantial disability, low health-related quality of life, and high economic burden" (141).

Written primarily for migraineurs (a term frequently used by various authors in this book) with a secondary audience of medical professionals, caretakers, and teachers who interact with people with migraines, this edited collection explores the world of migraines through essays, poetry, and other short creative works. Joan Didion begins the collection with her piece, "In Bed," where she states plainly what may be the central thesis of the anthology: "All of us who have migraine suffer not only from the attacks themselves but from this common conviction that we are perversely refusing to cure ourselves by taking a couple of aspirin, that we are actually making ourselves sick, that we 'bring it on ourselves'" (xxv). Similar sentiments are repeated throughout the text. Maia Sepp, in her fiction piece, "The Migraine Mafia," shows the tension many people with migraines experience with their loved ones. "Don't be ridiculous, smells don't cause headaches," one character tells our protagonist, who is trying to stave off a migraine, while wryly explaining that their friend "refuses to believe even the most basic science about migraines; she once told me the reason I get them is because I sometimes go to bed at night with my hair wet" (134).

The anthology is filled with familiar names. Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, and Oliver Sacks are featured prominently, along with many contemporary poets, essayists, and fiction writers. This book is an illuminating read for any medical humanities and disability studies scholars. Migraines affect a sizable percentage of the population; we all know someone who has migraines, if we don't have them ourselves. Yet, people with migraines often suffer silently or have their pain dismissed, as many of the works in this text show. However, migraines are a significant health issue, one that clearly needs more attention from both medical researchers and scholars. The book is divided into five parts: Part 1—What it Feels Like, Part 2—What People Don't See, Part 3—It's Just a Headache, Part 4—It's a Lifelong, Full Time Job, and Part 5—When It's Gone. Each section uses its time well, but the same questions emerge in each section: Why do migraineurs

have to deal with lengthy wait times for proper diagnoses? Why does the general public not understand the severity of a migraine? Why do healthcare professionals not all understand how migraines can affect everyday life? How does one live well with migraines?

One potential limitation of the text is the insistence in the introduction that the text “will afford medical students and their professors a substantive tool to teach empathy and compassion” (xv). As the medical humanities moves towards the critical medical humanities, which focuses on larger issues of health care (social justice, implicit bias, and the role medicine plays in our society) rather than just medical education and empathy, the book lacks a framework for understanding migraines critically. Although the book excels in collecting works that explore and explain migraines and how they’re experienced, I’m left wondering, “what now?” Although making migraines more real to the medical professionals treating the condition will clearly help fix the complex problems that migraines can cause for individual patients, thinking about the wider implications of migraine—how migraines and their treatment are part of larger social issues—could have made the text stronger.

So Much More than a Headache: Understanding Migraine Through Literature provides a thorough look into migraines and literature and is an illuminating read for those with migraines, medical professionals, or even general readers. The pieces are well-chosen, engaging, and diverse; any reader will leave with more empathy and understanding for what is a common—but difficult—condition for so many people.