



## Book Review: So Much More than a Headache - Understanding Migraine through Literature

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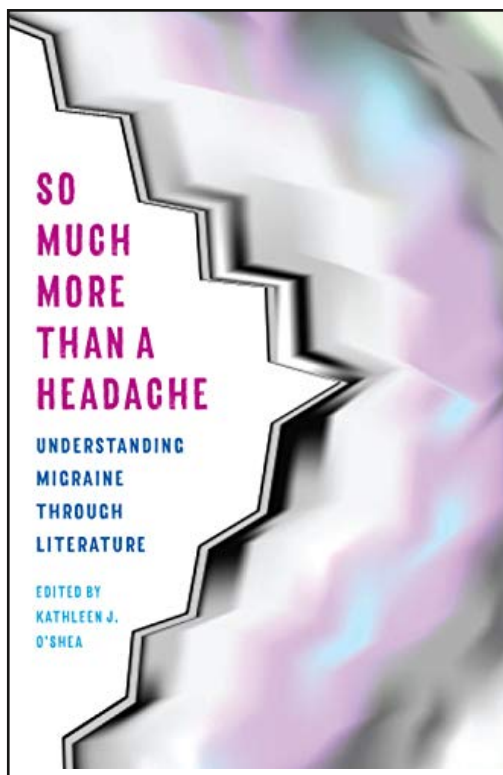
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So Much More than a Headache:  
Understanding Migraine through Literature

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As per the Preface, this collection covers five centuries of creative writing centered around Migraine! Astonishing that people – poets, essayists, and fiction writers – have been struggling to make sense of it over such a vast span of time and it still remains an incapacitating condition for many.

I know people with the occasional aura, and with the occasional one-sided

throbbing headache, but I also recall a brilliant chemistry teacher from my pre-med years who had splitting, soul-sapping headaches. She'd been examined and investigated and treated with all that was available at the time (this was the 1970s) but her headaches refused to be mollified. Had those been migraines? I wonder how she is now. I hope she 'came to terms with that migraine' (Anna Leahy, p 195).

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I have personally experienced scintillating scotomas [visual aura] one of which is appropriately displayed on the cover of this book. It is one of the reasons that I was keen to read and review this book. During the aura, and for a while after it, I have felt a bit light-headed but have never had a full-blown headache. The reality is vastly more challenging for others as exemplified by the artistic works in this collection.

The book is arranged into five intuitive parts: the first examines the experience (before, during, and after an attack); the second demonstrates how the multidimensionality of migraine is invisible to others; the third showcases the lack of empathy towards migraineurs who have, after all, 'just a headache'; the fourth gives a glimpse into what life looks like for the people who – in the throes of a migraine – must also negotiate work, parenting, families, friends, entertaining, travel, and hospital visits among other things; the final section is about the gift of the days – about the euphoria and the creativity - when there is no headache.

Most of the chosen pieces are poignant, compelling and brilliantly expressed. The extracts are from some of my favorite writers, Oliver Sacks being one. A few, though, particularly those written in older times, were hard for me to connect to owing to the use of words that have gone out of vogue. Another thing that struck me was that it would have been nice if the year

that the original piece was written had been mentioned alongside the title/name of author. I feel it would have added context to my interpretation of the writing.

This is a book that will benefit lay-people, both those who have experienced migraine themselves, and those who are struggling to understand what it means for a loved one who has to live with the condition. Equally, if not more, this collection will benefit the people who provide healthcare to migraineurs. The editor has done the hard work for teachers and learners of the health humanities in curating works of literature that deal with migraine.

Some of these pieces can be used in the classroom to better understand the condition, and all of the familial, social, economic, emotional, mental and occupational ramifications that are a part of it. This compilation may help future healthcare practitioners look at migraine not only from the standpoint of what can be done for the headache, but also what can be done for the person who has the headache. In the era of patient-centered medicine and to honor the concept of shared decision making, these stories/poems allow us to gain a deeper understanding of tailoring care according to the needs of the individual patient. Certainly, as the myriad manifestations testify, one size of therapy will not fit all when the malady under consideration is the ubiquitous migraine.