

Noble Accounts: American War Stories, American Mothers, and Failed American Dreams



In the social history of our country, the current cultural moment may seem particularly conducive to division, denial and fear. But in his 1962 essay “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” James Baldwin exposes what he sees as a specifically American character trait: panic at the idea that our dreams have failed, and the complacency that “so inadequately masks [this] panic.” Discussing the great American novelists up to the time of his writing, he elaborates: “all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen. And the panic... comes out of the fact that we are not confronting the awful question of whether or not all our dreams have failed... How have we managed to become what we have, in fact, become? And if we are, as indeed we seem to be, so empty and so desperate, what are we to do about it?” In life, as in fiction, this is an incendiary question.

Baldwin posits that “the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.” Living as we now do in what some deem a post-truth society, would a novelist hewing to Baldwin’s definition be noble or naïve?

Acknowledging the prominence of war literature in the American canon, Baldwin takes issue with those who idolize the giants—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Faulkner— and complain that the younger generation doesn’t live up to their legacy. “It is inane...” he says, “to compare the literary harvest of World War II with that of World War I—not only because we do not, after all, fight wars in order to produce literature, but also

because the two wars had nothing in common.”

As Michael Carson discussed on this site, Sam Sacks, in *Harper's*, lately took up the question of war literature and the prominence of the first person account. In [“First-Person Shooters: What’s Missing in Contemporary War Fiction,”](#) Sacks echoed Baldwin’s characterization of the American public as complacent, pointing out that the tendency to praise modern war writing “ennobles the account while deploring the event.” Returning soldiers, attempting to process or at least to share their experiences through literature, are met with a “disconnected,” “distractable” public. In Phil Klay’s much-praised *Redeployment*, Sacks observes, “redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly [the Terror Wars] were about.”

Does incomprehension, then, become the only thing the narrator and the reader have in common? It is personal experience that gives soldier-writers the authority to attempt to write about war, but it is also this very experience that distances them from their audience.

Sacks takes issue with soldiers’ personal accounts as literature. Citing an argument by Eric Bennett, he says, “Nearly all recent war writing has been cultivated in the hothouse of creative-writing programs. No wonder so much of it looks alike.” (I would argue that there’s something of a post hoc fallacy here, and point out that given the opportunity to use the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans already inclined toward writing might understandably choose to go for an arts degree that would otherwise seem impractical and/or financially out of reach.)

Sacks asks, “What might the novel be capable of—aesthetically and politically—if it broke out of its obsessively curated pigeonholes of first-person experience?” While this is a tantalizing question, some of the best fictional portraits of twentieth-century Americans were necessarily based on such

specific “pigeonholes,” isolated as the characters were by madness, geography, oppression, alienation, or a host of other factors. This was true not only for soldiers, but for women in various circumstances, notably that of the “desperate housewife”. This hyper-personal view through which we filtered literature over the last century paved the way for current trends; some dismiss the primacy of first-person accounts, others criticize the rise of “identity politics,” and the cult of the individual perhaps enforces our general cultural narcissism. Certainly the legacy of individuality, while containing elements we can be proud of, contributed to the rise of social media as both useful tool and scourge (depending on who you’re talking to). We hurtle insults; we troll each other; the more civilized and less anonymous among us agree to disagree. Maybe, as Baldwin implied, what unites us is our shared panic.

Failed dreams and illusions littered the ground in mid-twentieth century America. In *Fifth Avenue, 5 a.m.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman*, Sam Wasson observes: “With an unprecedented degree of leisure time, and more media access than ever before, the Fifties woman was the single most vulnerable woman in American history to the grasp of prefab wholesale thought, and by extension, to the men who made it.” These living Barbies in their gilded cages, straining against intellectual stultification, lead us to a generation of characters like Maria in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and, much later, Betty Draper in Matt Weiner’s *Mad Men*. In one episode of that show, a newly divorced mother moves to the suburbs and is regarded as an alien for, among other infractions, taking long aimless walks. “Where are you going?” a housewife asks, seething with disdain and suspicion.

Didion’s Maria is nearly incapacitated by “the unspeakable peril in the everyday... In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.” This is

reminiscent of stories of American soldiers in Vietnam, getting stoned out of their minds or slipping into heroin to numb their terror. Maria lives during the same era, but rather than being on her belly in a jungle, or marching in Mississippi facing down guns, riot gear, and water hoses, she is in L.A. on a vast freeway of loneliness, surrounded by drugs, vapidty and self-deception. After her husband leaves her, she sleeps near the pool, though sleeping outdoors strikes her as the "first step toward something unnameable." Hers is a very specific and isolated terror, perhaps even its own type of war. Can one human being's abject fear of annihilation be distinguished from another's? As readers, we may become irritated by the overly personal account, especially when the speaker is perceived as privileged, selfish, or narcissistic. But, says Baldwin, "What the writer is always trying to do is utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be." Sacks thinks recent war writing has it backward, trying to shoehorn the universal into the particular: "The public's unprecedented disconnection from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan—wars waged by a volunteer army and funded with borrowed money—has made it all the more eager to genuflect before the writing that has emerged from these conflicts. As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption, veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian."

Lucia Berlin's Korean War-era story, "Lead Street, Albuquerque," depicts a brilliant young artist who avoids military orders by getting his new wife pregnant. After she has the baby, his wife—another Maria—gazes out of the hospital window and smiles, saying, "How come nobody ever talks about this? About dying or being born?"

The next war, Vietnam, would be the first "television

war," and there would then be plenty of talk about dying. But unlike the men his age who are sent to be killed, Maria's husband, who "hated the baby's smells," is above such earthbound matters. (Except, of course, when having sex with his mistress, as he was doing when the baby was born). At the end of the story, the artist abandons Maria when she informs him that she is pregnant again. He leaves behind his rare, caged birds, which Maria gives to a neighbor. The story could be read as a sly take on McCarthy-era fear of artists and bohemians as morally corrupt and un-American, or it could stand on its merits as a depiction of one woman's reality.

Berlin tells, in an indirect way, a woman's experience (or non-experience) of a war. Where, I wonder, is the great American "spouse left behind during wartime" novel? The great one written by a female veteran? Sacks reminds us that "There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached."

What does it mean for our cultural conceptions of "big ticket items" like war, morality, and artistic authority that we live in a country with a long history of women's voices being silenced? This history strengthens the case for the centrality of personal experience in fiction. Still, Sacks's characterization makes sense. We, the somatized public, are supposedly at a safe remove from the dangers of war, praising the accounts of those who return without having to comprehend their realities or condone the act of war itself. "Ennobl[ing] the account while deploring the event."

It strikes me that we do the opposite with certain women's experiences. Mothering, for example. The "mommy wars", in fact, have this as a basic tenet: motherhood is an inherently noble pursuit, the most important job you'll ever have, etc. ad nauseam, but you're doing it wrong. Here is a kind of symmetry; men can't physically experience childbirth, and women have not—historically, officially—been able to

experience combat.

Baldwin said that "The multiple truths about a people are revealed by that people's artists—that is what the artists are for." This is interesting, given Berlin's antagonist artist character, obviously not the kind of artist Baldwin was thinking of. Or perhaps he was including such nasty characters? Maybe our dreams have failed: the American dream of what it is to be a mother, an artist, a soldier, a reader, a citizen. Perhaps they have failed because no American is able to fit these notions as neatly as we would like, now or ever. Baldwin also called this nation one "in which words are mostly used to cover the speaker, not to wake him up." Is panic and its attendant complacency surprising in a country where your youth doesn't belong to you, nor your body, your time with a new baby, or your privacy? And why shouldn't our fiction reflect our personal experiences of these failed dreams?