

An Interview with Helen Benedict, Author of WOLF SEASON

Helen Benedict is the author of seven novels, five books of nonfiction, and a play. Her most recent novel, *WOLF SEASON*, is this month's fiction selection on The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

WOLF SEASON "follows the war home," as a starred review in *Library Journal* puts it, examining war's reverberations on the lives of three women and their families. There is an Iraq war veteran named Rin, who keeps three wolves from a pack she started on her land with her late husband; she is raising a daughter who was born blind, perhaps from lingering effects of Rin's service. There's Naema, a widowed Iraqi doctor who has come to the U.S. with her son. And there is Beth, a Marine wife raising a troubled son, who awaits her husband's return from Afghanistan even as she fears it.

Helen was generous enough to take the time to speak to me about *WOLF SEASON*, war, writing, the strengths of fiction vs. nonfiction to speak to specific themes, Charlottesville, and more.

The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Helen, you've said that your newest novel, *WOLF SEASON*, is about "the long reach of war." Can you tell me a little more about that?

Helen Benedict: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have affected all of us in America, whether we know it or not. Our morality, our politics, our pocketbooks – all have been profoundly changed. But, of course, the most affected are those who have either served or suffered in those wars, and those who love them. Of the women in *WOLF SEASON*, Rin is a veteran of the Iraq War, Naema is an Iraqi refugee, and Beth is married to a marine deployed to Afghanistan. All three women are raising

their children alone because of the fallout of war. Of the men in the novel, Louis is also a veteran, Todd the marine, and they, too, are profoundly affected by their experiences of war. The characters in WOLF SEASON personify the ways that war has permeated the little town of Huntsville, NY, the people who live there, and, in a sense, us all.

But I don't want to characterize WOLF SEASON as purely a war book, for it is just as much about tenderness, love, and hope. It is also about the way human beings can rise above through horror and trauma to find and help one another, even when the odds are against them.

WBT: To which character in WOLF SEASON do you hope readers will feel most attached?

HB: I hope that all my characters are compelling in their own ways, but I suspect the answer to this has more to do with who a reader is than anything else. Already, I have heard a full range of reactions to the characters in WOLF SEASON: some readers like the women best, others the children, while yet others especially love the wolves, and some relate most to the men. One of the aspects of writing I love the most is seeing how varied the reactions of readers are, and how everyone brings their own interpretations to a book that can be quite independent from mine.



WBT: Helen, I've read that you grew up living all over the world, on islands in the Indian Ocean; in Berkeley, CA; and in England. You've said that during your years of island living you did not attend school and were allowed to "run wild," and I was instantly reminded of Margaret Atwood's youth, and her wild-and-free summers in remote camp sites with her entomologist father, her mom, and her brother.

Do you think the period of free time you experienced had an

effect on your imagination, or somehow helped foster a writerly way of thinking?

HB: Yes! Largely because of these travels, I spent a lot of time alone as a child, so learned to read early and took comfort in books. I was an addicted reader by the age of six or seven, so much so that I'd be heartbroken when a book ended. Then I discovered I could continue the magic by writing myself.

I also learned about poverty and suffering by living on those islands, which were poor and disease-ridden at the time. Even at the age of three, I was profoundly saddened by seeing starving children and people living in shacks. Children understand these things much more deeply than we adults realize.

WBT: With such an international childhood and youth, how did the issues facing women in the American military first come onto your radar? Your nonfiction book, *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, was the first book I read by an academic discussing female service members; if it was not the first, then at least it was the first one I heard of, with the largest impact and starting the most national discussion. Most academics I know, at least in my experience, rarely think about the military at all. What brought you to this topic, and with such conviction that you've continued to address it across at least three books?

HB: I am not really an academic, but a journalist and a novelist who happens to teach. The research I did for *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, which was indeed the first book to look at women who served in the post-9/11 wars, was essential not only for my journalistic work, but for my related novels, *SAND QUEEN* and *WOLF SEASON*. Over a stretch of more than three years, I interviewed some 40 women veterans of the Iraq War, and then later I also interviewed Iraqi refugees. These interviews, along with other research, informed my imagination, allowing me to plunge deep into the interior

lives of refugees and soldiers to create my fictional characters; something I would never have dared do had I not spent so long listening to real people.

As for why I came to this topic, I'll start by saying that all my work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has looked at the powerless and the outsider, and much of it has especially focused on women. When I saw the U.S. invade Iraq for no reason and learned of the destruction and death we caused there as a result; and then also learned about the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the moral injury that the war was causing to women and men, I had to write about it. I care passionately about justice, and the right of the oppressed to be heard.

As for why I turned from journalism to fiction – from THE LONELY SOLDIER to my novels, SAND QUEEN and WOLF SEASON – that is because I wanted to get to what war does to our interior lives, our hearts, our morals, our souls, our minds. That is the territory of fiction.



WBT: I first read THE LONELY SOLDIER as a relatively new officer's-wife, and to be quite honest, felt like I went through several stages of grief while reading. It was difficult to reconcile my husband's recent, major life decision, and his well-intentioned enthusiasm for it, with the book's description of the military as based on a model of predation, and occupied by, in essence, various levels of predators very graphically rendered (recruiters who force teenage girls, for example, to give them head in parked cars). It was also difficult to consider our family's new path from the perspective of my conviction that I was a feminist, with a deep concern for other women. How had I not known this was happening to female service members? I remember the striking detail that the women profiled in the book asked to use their real names, as a way of "fighting back." THE LONELY SOLDIER

was the first step in a long and rather painful exposure of, what may not necessarily be my experience with the military, but what is the truth for many women.

I guess my question here is one that's bothered me to some degree for more than thirteen years: Do you feel that a person whose life work is spent within an institution like the U.S. military has chosen, in effect, to side with an oppressive regime? Is it possible to still be an ally to others, those often ignored or hurt by war and by institutionalized racism, sexism, and violence?

HB: I think this is a brave question, and in a way, my answer lies in *WOLF SEASON*, as well as my other related books, because my veteran characters are all struggling with questions like yours, especially how to push back against injustice and wrongdoing within the military, and how to feel like a good person when you have come to feel you were used to do wrong.

My veteran characters have been distorted by war and its inherent injustices, yes, but they also want to love, mend, and amend. This is the essential struggle in the aftermath of war for us all – how, having done a great wrong, we can grope our way back to doing some right.

Another path, and I do see veterans doing this, is to help the real victims of our wars: the innocent Iraqi citizens whose lives we have destroyed. This, too, is a theme in *WOLF SEASON*.

But going back to the earlier part of your question, yes, I do think that joining the military is to give yourself to an institution that usually causes more harm than good. But that said, I also think it's important to fight wrongdoing from the inside. Part of our duty as citizens of a democracy is to hold governmental institutions accountable when they go wrong, and to expose and fight and correct that wrong wherever we can. I know how much courage it takes the military from within, but

I've seen active duty service members and veterans do it, and I admire them deeply.

WBT: You were in Charlottesville, VA, during the horrifying neo-Nazi rally this past August. How did you end up there at that time, and what did you observe, on the ground? What, for you, did that event say about America circa 2017-18?

HB: [I have written](#) about that terrible day in Charlottesville before, so all I'll say here is that I was at an artist's residency nearby, so went to bear witness and counter-protest. The main point I made in this essay is that, as a writer and reader, I know that using one's imagination to put oneself in the shoes of others is the key to empathy and compassion. The racists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites who attended the rally that day refused to use their imaginations to do any such thing, thus freeing themselves to dehumanize the people they wished to hate. It was a sickening sight to behold, the screaming red faces of those who relish hatred; the opposite of what writers and artists stand for.

WBT: You've addressed themes of systemic violence through both fiction and nonfiction. How do you feel these genres are uniquely suited to addressing political issues?

HB: Nonfiction explains it, fiction explores it. In *WOLF SEASON*, as in any novel, I was able to plunge into a character's heart to show how it really feels to be the victim or the perpetrator or violence, and what that does to the human soul. The field of fiction is the human interior – our hearts, our minds, our morals. I love that. That's why I read novels, and that's why I write them.

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WOLF SEASON is available from [Bellevue Literary Press](#) or wherever books are [sold](#). A reading group guide is available for download [here](#). You can find out more about Helen Benedict's writing on her [web site](#).