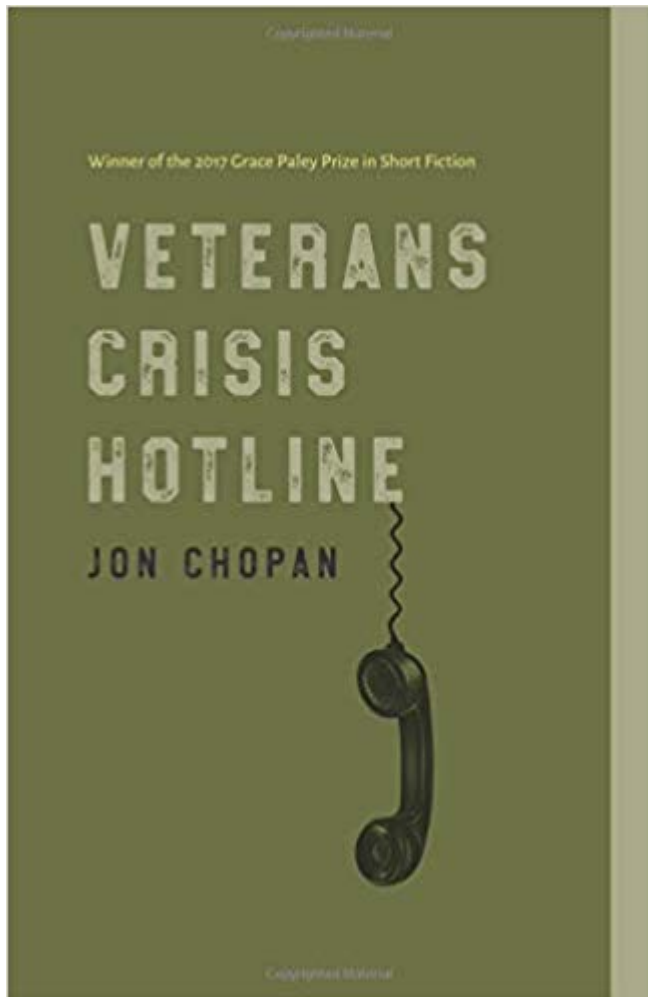


# Review of Jon Chopan's Veterans Crisis Hotline



A few years ago, I had a conversation with a friend named Ted. Ted is a fellow veteran, and classmate of mine from the Air Force Academy who may be forgiven his obsession with *Moby Dick*. We were pushing our kids across the ice of Westchester Lagoon, a large pond here in Anchorage that the municipality grooms for ice skating, exhaling thoughts on books and writing into the winter air. Phil Klay's *Redeployment* had recently been released to critical acclaim, and our talk turned to authenticity in war literature. There was something about this war—this *forever* war—that we agreed was allowing for a wider interpretation of war. A public affairs officer, and not an infantry type, had written a well-received story collection

that felt like it might end up as *the book* of our wars. It seemed to signal a paradigm shift.

Jon Chopan's [\*Veterans Crisis Hotline\*](#) (2018, University of Massachusetts Press) reinforces the idea that war literature is no longer the sole dominion of those who've participated directly in combat. A winner of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) 2017 Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction, the collection joins a growing canon of quality writing about war by authors who lack the first-hand combat experience traditionally associated with war literature.

As the title indicates, *Veterans Crisis Hotline* focuses on contextualizing war from the individual level. More specifically: how the Forever War affected those who voluntarily participated in it. This connective tissue links each story. With the exception of the first short story, which shares (roughly) the book's title, each story that follows begins with a title page that includes a partially redacted name, location, tour dates, and call duration that frames the stories as having originated from a call to a veterans crisis hotline. It's a somewhat effective artifice that allows Chopan to present narratives told, without exception, from a first-person point of view that establishes immediacy and narrative authenticity. I only say "somewhat" because the title story is the sole piece in the collection that relies on a fictional narrative built on interactions between a crisis hotline caller and operator. The crisis hotline itself does not appear in the remainder of the stories, which results in tension between the collection's physical narrative structures. I wasn't looking for a collection built off transcribed fictional dialogue, but the greatest harmony between structure and narrative in the collection exists within the pages of the first story, titled "Crisis Hotline: Veterans Press 1." It's a haunting piece in which the narrator, a veteran named Byrne, works at a crisis hotline center, where he fields calls from not just veterans on the brink.

"[0]ld widowers. Some were lonely bachelors who were looking for dating advice. Others were fine, except they needed an audience to tell a war story to, someone who'd yet to hear it. Reliving it gave them a sort of pleasure, or maybe catharsis. One man who was in his nineties called me every week. Each time he called he asked for me by name, caught me up on the news from his neighborhood, "current events" he called it. Mostly it was gossip about the young soccer mom next door, the cheating husband. He talked about them so much that I felt like they had become characters in my own life. He was a veteran of the Second World War, but he never talked to me about that."

Byrne goes on to establish a friendship with an amputee named Eddie who shares a bus with him, and the relationship progresses to an intense level of intimacy that Byrne cannot replicate with his girlfriend, a nurse at the local VA hospital. In one scene, Byrne finds Eddie in his apartment, sick for days and burning with fever. Before Eddie can go to the hospital, he asks Byrne to help him take a bath.

"Later, they would diagnose him with pneumonia, He would recover, of course. He was young and strong and had a great desire to live. I'd learned that much in my time with him. But there, in his dimly lit bathroom, as I scrubbed him and rinsed him clean, as I put shampoo in his hair and gently poured water over his head, he wept and I said nothing knowing, finally, that this was the only comfort he would ever ask of me."

It's a gorgeous literary moment that illustrates the bond that can exist between men who've shared war, and a stirring rejection of the unique brand of toxic masculinity the military tends to breed. This isn't to say Chopan shies away from the ugly side of veteran homecomings. There's the vigilante justice executed in "Men of Principle," the wanton self-destruction of "Battle Buddy," and the veteran suicide of "On Leave." But Jon Chopan goes to great length to ensure

*Veterans Crisis Hotline* peels back stereotype in his quest to understand the complex nature of military service.

The book suffers from a couple of little inconsistencies that rang hollow: the mention of a recently closed paper mill in Anchorage for example, when I've been unable to find record of a paper mill at any time (I live in Anchorage). But these are mere chips in the facade, and have nothing to do with Jon Chopan's ability as a civilian to effectively convey the post-9/11 veteran experience. No, the trouble with *Veterans Crisis Hotline* is the company it keeps. As a short story collection that relies on first-person narration, it belongs on a shelf next to Phil Klay's *Redeployment*. Sitting next to a National Book Award Winner, well that's just tough.

The most audacious of Chopan's stories, however, does not feature a veteran come home, but the son of a soldier whose father goes missing for some time before being declared dead. Child narrators, even the teenage boy of the story "The Cumulative Effect," are tricky. Writers must walk a fine line between over-privileging their narrator with sophisticated language that strains authenticity, and infantilization. Nothing about the story's narrator rang hollow, however, and at all levels, the story is a beautiful heartbreaker.

I've long argued that it's time to replace Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* as an example of good war literature produced by a civilian. The last time I read through, I found it a hackneyed appropriation of veteran material manipulated to further an individual viewpoint. I firmly believe it doesn't survive the modern era's standards for writing outside one's experience. And frankly, there's no time like the present—in which a fraction of the American society fights on behalf the rest—for a non-veteran to step into the arena. Jon Chopan has achieved this feat with *Veterans Crisis Hotline*. With great care, he has written outside what he knows, and in doing so proven willing to grapple with societal norms and uncomfortable issues. Viewed this way, *Veterans Crisis Hotline*

is a welcome addition to my shelves of war literature,  
neighbors be damned.