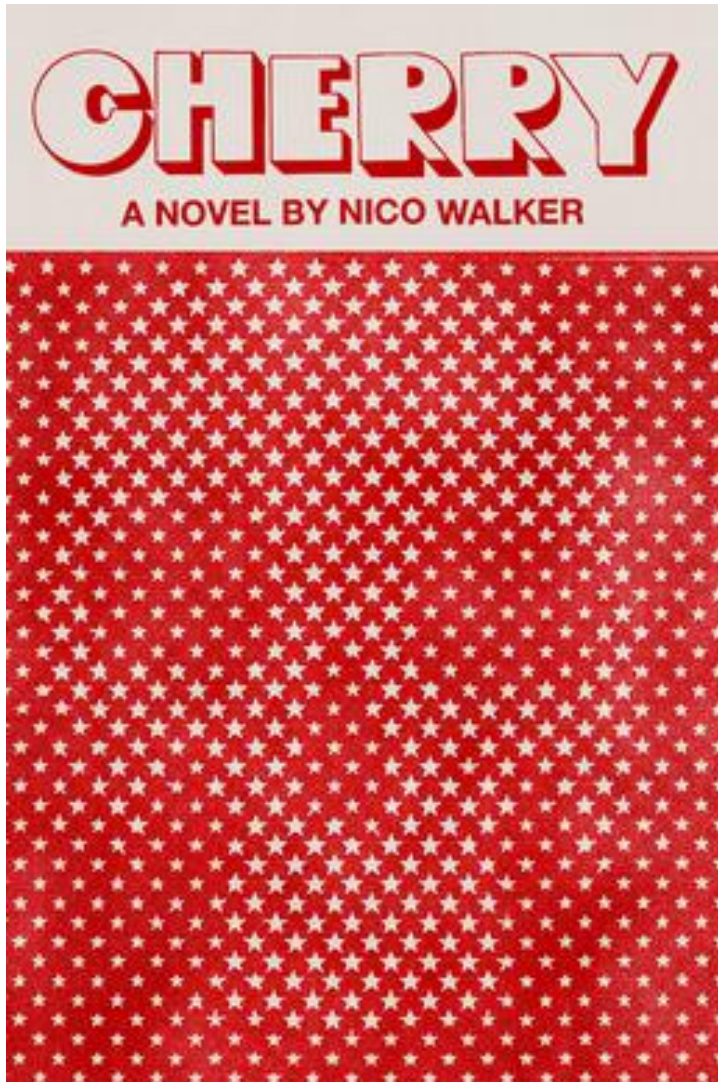


New Review from Michael Carson: “Cherry” by Nico Walker



Early on in Nico Walker’s *Cherry*, the narrator, working a dead-end shoe store job to pay for drugs while his parents pay for his college, says that he has a well cultivated sense of shame. This is true. He does. Many people do not. Many people are shameless. They do not care how they degrade themselves as long as society says it’s okay to degrade themselves in this way. Or they are full of shame in an uncultivated way. It just spills out here and there, at rare moments, when they let their guard down. It makes you wonder if they even care about

their shame. If they too are shameless as those that are shameless.

That would make everyone shameless except for Nico Walker. I think this might very well be true. I think only Nico Walker feels shame. He is the only writer from the recent wars that I've read who has taken his shame and cultivated it to such a degree that it is impossible not to be ashamed of the Iraq War (or whatever the journalists and historians are calling it now).

He makes you ashamed of your country. He makes you ashamed of yourself. He makes you ashamed of being alive.

It's glorious. *Cherry* is an absolute delight. I have not had this much fun reading a book in a very long time.

Maybe it's because Nico Walker robbed a bunch of banks. Maybe it's because Nico Walker was a bad soldier. Maybe it is because Walker had a "bad" war (whatever that means). Maybe it is because Walker was a junkie. Maybe it is because Walker is actually funny. Maybe it is because Walker can write. Or maybe it's all these bound into one. Maybe the urge to make it about one or another is to miss the point. It shows a terribly uncoordinated sense of shame. It is maybe, even, a little shameless.

So I kind of love this book. Walker's narrator doesn't play fuck fuck games (as they used to say in Ranger school, one of those schools that train us to kill better, to play roles better, to take pride in shamelessness). He gets straight to the point. He knows the ending. Death, indignity, compromise. The ending, as he says, is fucked.

Here he is talking about Emily, the woman that provides a strange and mysterious through-line in the novel, which feels, at times, to be more of a fantasy than anything else, the idea of a woman we might imagine for ourselves but also, miraculously, a woman who insists on being herself:

"The day I met her we went for a walk after class and we ended up in her dorm room. We talked for a while there and then for whatever reason I got to crying, like really bawling-my-fucking-eyes-out crying. I'd already seen everything that was going to happen and it was a nightmare. Something like that. And she was really sweet to me. I don't think there was ever anyone who felt more compassion for weak motherfuckers."

Whoever Emily is, whatever her fictional or physical reality, I love her too. I love this compassion. I love the fact that she disappears and then reappears mysteriously under sewer grates. That she follows the narrator through the war and then into drugs and his life of crime and that she puts ice on his crotch before his final robbery that sends him (and Nico himself) to eight years in jail. That she is always cursing. That she is fucked up, that she sees that it is fucked up, all of it, yet somehow, she still has compassion for a man who says (idiotically, perversely, criminally), "I take all the beautiful things to heart and they fuck my heart until I about die from it."

She is an ending that is not an ending. She is the possibility of a person. He tries to be good for her. Not jerk off to anyone but her. Not sleep around. Keep her high. He tries to be decent in a world that is not, that cannot be, that does not care about beauty, that does not want to die from beauty so dies all the time, forever and ever.

Mid-deployment, between one succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders and the next succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders, the narrator and other soldiers watch pornography and see that the "unsuspecting" woman wears a wedding ring and that the reality TV pornography is not reality TV pornography.

The narrator says:

"And we know then that life was just a murderous fuckgame and

that we had been dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.”

If we don't have compassion for the weak, for those who don't have a choice and those who make bad choices, we have nothing.

Or not nothing. Not exactly. We still have Staff Sergeant North.

North looks like Morrissey. North is from Idaho. North is a killer. He grows to hate the narrator for being incompetent. For being, deep down, a faker. Not a soldier. North disappears from the narrative. But we are told that he survives the war unscathed, that he goes on to bigger and better things. Killers often do.

The narrator is not a killer. It kills him.

He's a medic, though. A bad one. Here's the narrator trying and failing to save an Iraqi that his squad accidentally murdered for leaving his own house at night.

“I should have packed the haji full of gauze, I should have kept packing the wound til I couldn't pack it anymore, til it was packed tight. But I didn't. I should have had him lie on the side he was wounded on. But I forgot. I said I was going to prop the haji's feet on my helmet because he could go into shock if his feet weren't propped up that way. And even though this was true I was only saying it just to say things because there was no exit wound and I didn't know what to do. The haji's eyes rolled up in his head and then came back, focused again, rolled up again. I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock.

North said, ‘Do what you have to do, doc. You don't have to tell us.’

I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing something right. I stuck him on his right thigh and went back to working on a line. His arm was thin. I couldn't get a

flash. Then I got a flash, but he moved and I lost it.

I said, 'Keep still, you fuck! I'm trying to help you.'

North said, 'Be quiet, doc.'"

The narrator does not listen to North. The narrator is not a professional. He cries. He yells. He makes jokes. He commits crimes. He goes crazy. He counts his failures one by one, lovingly, like someone with a well cultivated sense of shame. Like Jerry in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" (which provides the epigraph to one of Walker's sections), the narrator won't shut up, won't not fall on his own knife. He is going North from the zoo. To tell his zoo story. Our story. That life is very often a murderous fuck game and that we are almost always dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.

So. This being a fact. What do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We might laugh at flying babies. Before deployment, the narrator is put in charge of a recruitment "rockwall" in Ohio somewhere. Parents hand him babies and the babies don't weigh enough for the pullies, so they just fly up to the top of the rockwall. The narrator doesn't know what to do but the parents keep on handing him babies. He straps them up and away they go.

We could also, perhaps, be crushed by the beauty of it all, as the narrator often is. This, remember, is what makes him a weak motherfucker in the first place.

Here is Emily and the narrator getting fake married for real extra benefits. She's wearing some kind of gas station attendant uniform and his nose is swollen from a friend's headbutt:

"And we knew at that moment we were the two most beautiful things in the world. How long it lasted, I don't know, but it

was true for at least a few minutes. Six billion people in the world and no one had it on us.”

Vonnegut once said that there are billions of people in this world and that he supposes they all want dignity.

They do. They do. And sometimes they even get it.

Vonnegut also said remember the nice moments.

Here’s a nice moment from Iraq:

“One time the prisoners all sang together and you could hear them outside the jail and it was very beautiful and it made you feel like an asshole.”

I feel like an asshole after reading this book.

It’s okay. Sometimes it is good to feel like an asshole. Sometimes we need to remember we are assholes. How else could we ever stop being one?

There’s been a lot of controversy lately about the book and the movie and instagram photos. Some say that Walker didn’t write it. Or he doesn’t deserve this after what he did or didn’t do. Blah blah blah. The internet keeps on handing us babies. Away the babies go.

The question is this: Do we want a hero? Or do you want a novelist? I for one have had enough of heroes. Bring on more Nico Walkers. If only because Nico Walker cares about how he degrades himself. He is sensitive to his degradation and the different ways that each one of us degrade ourselves on a daily basis. He lives it, understands it. I would not recommend this way of being to anyone else but Nico Walker. I wouldn’t even recommend it to Nico Walker (not all the time anyway). But I’m glad we got this book out of it. Because that war was fucked. And we should be ashamed.