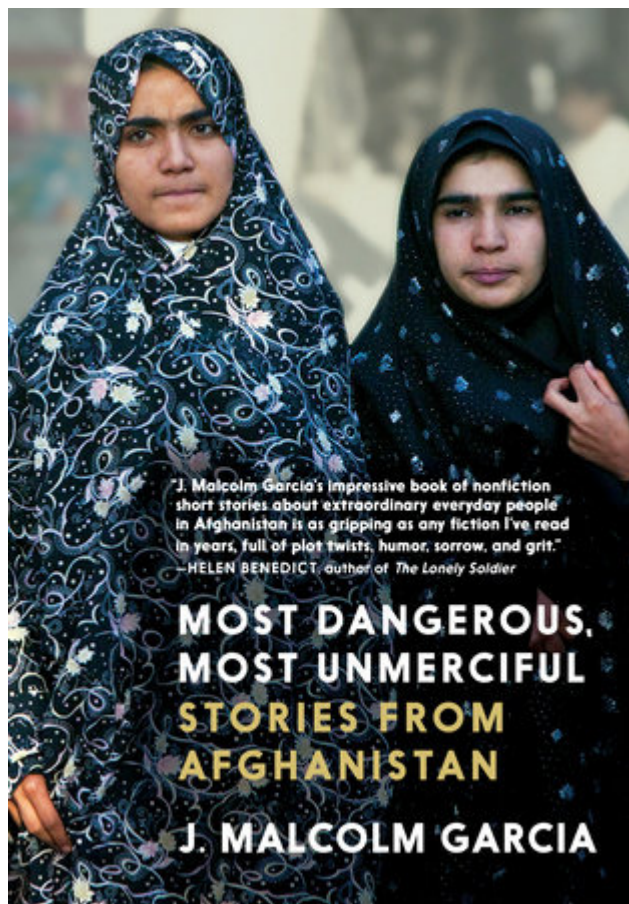


# New Nonfiction from Michael Gruber: Review of J. Malcolm Garcia's "Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful: Stories from Afghanistan"



## Humanity in Afghanistan

For the average American G.I. who served in Afghanistan, the country was of a different world. Most understood Afghans had relatively little in common with us, its would-be Western custodians. For starters, its population spoke obscure Indo-Iranian languages like Pashto and Dari, which had no share with our West Germanic-based English. It was universally Muslim, which while monotheist, had a variety of practices we

found puzzling, or even less charitably, threatening, at least when viewed through the vaguely jingoistic shadow of 9/11. The day-to-day life of Afghans seemed to revolve around the dull monotony of subsistence agriculture, and moved at an unhurried, slow, perhaps even complacent, pace. Their households were multi-generational, with sometimes four or even five generations living under the “roof” of the same *qalat*. Whether in the bazaar or the fields, Afghans seemed to us frozen in amber, living a way of life that we ascribed to ancient times. Our assessment was that they were illiterate, poor, simple, and locked behind barriers of social custom and theology we could never hope to penetrate.

Much of this analysis is clearly retrograde and patronizing, but it was far more motivated by youthful hubris and ignorance than some sort of loitering colonial mindset. The average American G.I. in Afghanistan was not college educated. The extent of our education on Afghanistan had been delivered in a vulgar *milieu* of VH1, Comedy Central, cable news, and only the most remotely accurate Hollywood renditions. Most of us didn't even own passports. In fact, for many American service members, their deployment was their first time abroad. One's ability to empathize, or to even understand the Afghan way of life, was also limited by the task at-hand, which much of the time was unambiguously dangerous. Life experience and cross-cultural barriers only accentuated this divide. To put it bluntly, as has been true for the membership of all armies throughout history, we were really just kids, and therefore had an appropriately teenage level of understanding. It is hard to assign an “imperialist” mindset to what Robert Kotlowitz terms “adolescent fervor.”

Much of what we learned of Afghanistan has therefore come *since* our deployments, as a way to help make sense of what we observed. J. Malcolm Garcia's *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful* is one such continuation of this project, describing the innards of a world many of us only observed from a distance,

despite being immersed in it. Garcia is a freelance journalist who appears to have a niche for war-torn or impoverished regions: his website reports he has also worked in Chad, Sierra Leone, and Haiti. The text in question is a collection of short stories that Garcia has compiled from his time in Afghanistan, all of them non-fiction.

As a writer, Garcia seems to be something of a Studs Terkel disciple, and the text is relentless in its centering of Afghans and capturing the *raison d'être* of social history: "history from below," as it's termed. In fact, we learn relatively little of Garcia himself, except for a tender chapter where he adopts and ships home an orphaned cat he names "Whistle." At least, I interpret this to be Garcia, although it may not be, as he refers to the anonymous protagonist only as "the reporter," and I can't tell if this is Garcia's effort at rhetorical humility or his description of a third party. Elsewhere, the text is mostly page after page of Afghans in their own voice, articulating their own feelings, history, and sentiment.

It seems notable that I cannot recall a similar literary project—one which centers the experience of the average civilian Afghan or Iraqi—sourced from any of our recent foreign entanglements. It is loosely represented in other journalistic media, like occasional pieces one may have encountered in *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic*, but these are news reports, not short stories collected into a single volume. Likewise, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is historical fiction, not documentary non-fiction. Garcia's project seems unique in this regard. To be sure, *Most Dangerous, Most Unmerciful's* genre—which I classify as oral war history—was pioneered some 40 years ago in Terkel's *The Good War*. But texts like these, especially when written by Americans, have primarily relayed the perspective of war veterans, not civilians in warzones. This underrepresentation of the noncombatant civilian is a tremendous disservice,

especially considering the horrific suffering they often endured. That Garcia's text makes this glaringly obvious is perhaps its most important contribution.

The stories shared by Garcia are wide-ranging. "Mother's House," the longest and most compelling in the book, tells of a recovery center in Kabul for narcotics addicts, likely the first of its kind, ran by a woman appropriately nicknamed "Mother." "Feral Children" gives voice to the destitute children of Kabul, who are subject to collecting cans or polishing shoes. Garcia makes observations of Afghan society throughout these stories, noting, for example, the marked contrast these youths have with their Westernized counterparts, whose libertine style of dress and flamboyant mannerisms are nearly indistinguishable from an American teenager in, say, Atlanta or Houston. And while Garcia seems to gravitate around Kabul, commentary like this—and his occasional bravery in venturing out to rural areas, such as when he is confronted by what appear to be Taliban supporters while at "a graveyard for Arab fighters" in "In Those Days"—speaks to the unfathomable chasm that existed in Afghanistan between Kabul, where the decided minority of families who benefitted from NATO occupation usually resided, and the destitute rural poor, who did not share in those benefits. Garcia attempts to give voice to both, showcasing the country's complexity and tremendous contradictions—ethnic, moral, economic, social, and otherwise—and how they defined both its people and the war writ-large.

In tandem with the text's keen insights is the steady drumbeat of this book, which is poverty and relentless suffering. To be sure, the stories are varied and unique, but my sense is they begin to blend. They are stories of human suffering which manifest into clambering, scrabbling, and scavenging; people using what meager resources they have just to survive, whether from the war, disease, or hunger. But the themes become so common and consistent that I felt myself having the reaction

ones does when they are exposed to homelessness or panhandling in a major city—"I'm not numb to your suffering, but this appears so ubiquitous that I don't know how to help you address it, or if I even should, or if I even can." I felt a sort of self-protective compassion fatigue while reading this text, or worse, that I had become a sadistic voyeur engaging in slum tourism. Perhaps this is Garcia's intention, or perhaps it speaks to sneaking deficits in my own character as I continue to process my—and our—involvement in that country and our two-decade-long war. Regardless, Garcia has produced here a fine addition to this continued exploration, and gives us an exposure to the humanity of Afghans that we would do well to absorb.