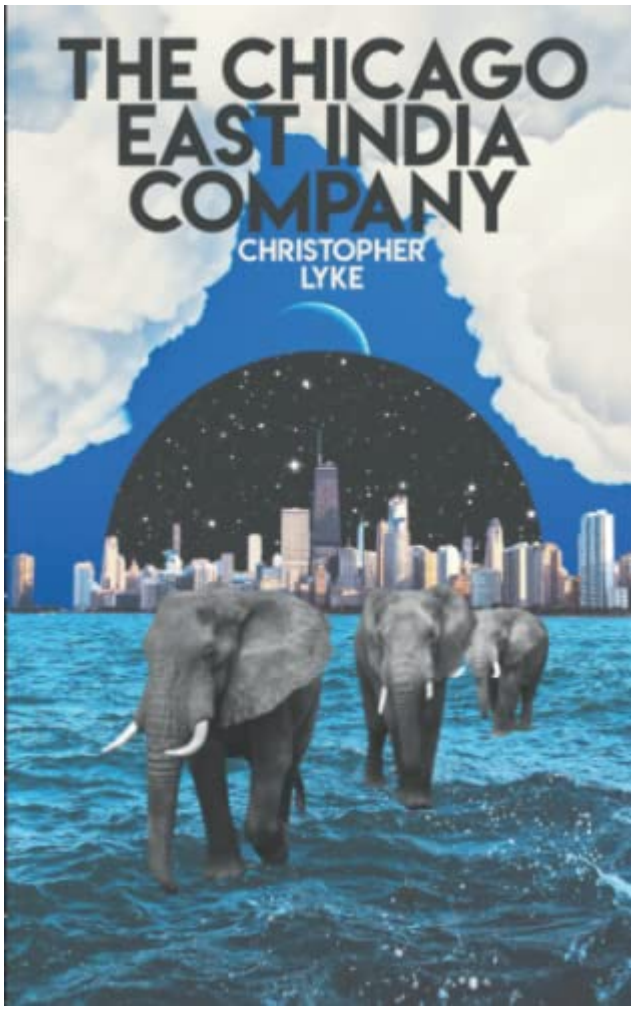
New Nonfiction: Interview with Adam Kovac

So that’s what I did. I sat down and attempted to write The Great American War Novel. I wouldn’t have sent the manuscript out on submission if I didn’t think I’d come as close as I was able to actually accomplishing that.

New Review by Travis Klempan: Adam Kovac’s The Surge

Whether we wanted it or not, America was – up until this very moment, perhaps – truly the indispensable nation.

New Nonfiction: Review of Christopher Lyke’s “The Chicago East India Company”



Gravitational lensing – as half-remembered from an article I read years ago, as confirmed courtesy of a recent Wikipedia dive – takes advantage of the presence of massive objects to shape the path of light coming from objects on the far side relative to the viewer. A sufficiently large star, for instance, could be used by Earth-bound astronomers to "see" far beyond what they otherwise could by bending rays of light coming from distant bodies. The basic physics behind the principle was known to Newton and Cavendish, and a multinational effort just after World War I confirmed many of Einstein's theories about gravitational lensing. It may be our best bet for obtaining direct visual evidence of habitable exoplanets in other solar systems.

Christopher Lyke's The Chicago East India Company (Double Dagger Press) is a sufficiently large star. A collection of short stories and vignettes based both on the author's time in

uniform and career as a teacher, the book takes on a refreshing and encouraging role, despite the sometimes-laden and harrowing subject matter of surviving combat and finding purpose in a bureaucratic education system.

I'll return to the "sufficiently large star" concept in a moment.

The writing throughout TCEIC is, as one would guess, taut and clean, in the sense that there are no wasted words or characters or stories. There's a physicality that guides the collection, present in spare but efficient vignettes – whether character portraits like "Canton"' or meditations on events as in "Another Ginger Ale Afternoon" – but on full display in the longer pieces like "Life in the Colonies," which amplifies the corporeal experiences of a jungle excursion by examining the personal and political context surrounding it. The sensory descriptions also ground what could be otherwise ephemeral introspection, and this balanced duality continues throughout the book.

In "These Are Just Normal Noises" the monotony of a foot patrol drags on for more than four pages but the writing never falters. Not a word is unnecessary in building to the tension of the impending incident. Every description – of the "kohl-lined eyes and dyed-red beards" on the men and women encountered in the village, or the "riverbed…the tall grass that covered the ground…the ditches and small stonewalls" – seems at once familiar and extraordinary. The connection back to the world entices, but endangers:

> We pulled them from thoughts of Chicago and the L and the weekend festivals that they were missing. A soldier remembered the way a girl had spoken to him and how she seemed cool and like the river that glided through the valley below him. We pulled them from this and back to the mountain, to a path or a rocky outcrop at which to point a gun.

We know it's coming, right? The ambush, the firefight, the attack – we've seen this before. The description continues, though, hard and unrelenting, and the agony of a withdrawal delayed by wounded vehicles and drivers, another couple hundred words detailing the by-now familiar yet still deadly blow-by-blow, but "It must have been only a minute since the fight began." We feel that minute stretched over two pages and the exhaustion weighs heavy on us.

A similar burden falls on our shoulders when we read "Solon," perhaps the most memorable story in the book. An unnamed teacher – though likely the same man whose travails we've been following the whole time – ventures from the demanding and unfulfilling classroom to the football field, coaching a team of students unaccustomed to winning and not far removed from the soldiers he once served alongside. Hopes are raised, then tempered; this is no Hollywood story of a team defying all the odds, though the growth and depth of the kids is much more realistic. Dreams are dashed, not by death but by an injury sufficient to upend what would be, in a scene meant to inspire, the rags-to-riches career of the honest and likable young Darnell. The teacher unspools, seeing the players set beside soldiers set against football players from his own suburban youth in Ohio, and spins out of control:

> …he knew that the team he was coaching was bad, and that it wasn't their fault. They were in a system that prevented them from being slightly more than terrible. And if it were a movie maybe an emotional director would have the poor kids win. But in reality, if they played one another his boys would probably get hurt…He didn't blame the suburban boys, they didn't hate the city boys, they just knew they'd beat them to death and wanted to, because they wanted to beat everyone down. That's what they were trained to do, and bred to do, and would do. It wasn't malice so much as inertia. They'd smile uncynically and help our boys up after cracking their ribs.

I found no morals here, because every time I tried to connect the Ohio players to Afghanistan or the Chicago players to the insurgents or reversed the roles or asked *Who would be who in the war zone* the futility of that line of questioning stopped me. War is not football, football is not war, but both deserve our attention for their consequences.

The other stories – "No Travel Returns"; "The Gadfly"; and the title piece – contain just as much depth of characterization and breadth of plot, maybe even more so. As readers we recognize the central character – sometimes first-person narrator, sometimes third-person participant, even as a literal bystander in "Western and Armitage," when he spends less than a page delivering a gut-punch and denouement at the scene of a traffic accident – that Lyke inhabits and uses to bring us along on a journey that doesn't end. "None of it ended," he says in protest to the idea that stories need resolution. But compared to many combat or redeployment stories about the hopelessness of such an idea, I feel like there's something to look forward to here.

TCEIC arrived at an opportune time for me as a writer. Full disclosure: Christopher Lyke founded and runs Line of Advance, a military- and veteran-focused literary website that has hosted much of my work, and even more work from many other writers. LOA sponsors the Col. Darron L. Wright Award for military and military-adjacent writers. They've amassed enough groundbreaking and stunning writing to publish Our Best War Stories (Middle West Press), with hopes for a second volume. LOA has been a great and generous home for my own writing, and I was excited to read more of Lyke's own work, if only to see into the mind behind a mainstay in the vet writing constellation.

Getting civilians to care about "The Troops" has been far easier than getting them to care about veterans. Wave a few flags, drop a few parachutists into a football game or two and they will stand for the anthem and mouth the affirmations

they’re expected to. It’s American tradition – dating back to the Newburgh Conspiracy, the Bonus Army, and burn pit legislation – to celebrate war and forget the vet.

The writing in TCEIC embodies an antidote to that malaise, not in building overly optimistic bridges across the civil-military gap, but in reminding those of us in the vet writing communities that this kind of storytelling still matters, and will continue to matter. As major combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq fade in the general consciousness – if it were ever really there, short of jarring news announcements – and attention shifts elsewhere, spaces like LOA and books like The Chicago East India Company serve to focus our efforts. The longevity of a website that allows for creative expression gives hope. The straddling of worlds in TCEIC – connecting the experiences and people in a combat zone miles and years away to the experiences and people in contemporary and ongoing America – gives us that sufficiently large star. We can use its presence to bend the light and see habitable planets beyond the terrestrial profusion of “typical” war stories, the kind you see in Hollywood if at all, and imagine literary planets where authors with military memories can explore stories beyond combat, can continue “writing things that aren’t just bang bang stories,” as Lyke puts it in an interview with Phil Halton, and maybe one day bring along a few of those civilians to populate these new worlds.

The Chicago East India Company by Christopher Lyke is available for purchase here.