

# Forgive Me



I have confused  
the bombs  
that were in  
the desert

with those  
birth control devices  
implanted  
in the uterus

Forgive me,  
war and women,  
I know nothing of either

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## Lauren Johnson Interviews Amy Waldman, Author of 'A Door in the Earth'

*Amy Waldman's novel, A Door in the Earth, follows Parveen, a young Afghan-American woman who returns to her war-torn homeland after discovering a memoir by humanitarian Gideon Crane. Parveen is not the only American influenced by the book; Mother Afghanistan has become a bible for American counterinsurgency operations in the country. If part of that story rings familiar, it is: The book-within-a-book was inspired by Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson's 2006 memoir of building schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was later*

*revealed to be largely fabricated.*

*I was one of the legions of soldiers who read and fell head over steel-toed boots for Mortenson's story. Like Waldman's protagonist, I ultimately found myself in a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2009. As a military information operations officer, I was charged with "winning hearts and minds"—an instrument of the "kind power" advocated by Gideon Crane. I didn't share Parveen's Afghan heritage, but I see my younger self in her idealism and naivety. I feel the crushing blow when expectations and reality clash.*

*I relate these parallels to Waldman before our interview, and she begins by asking me questions about my experience—curiosity cultivated through a career in journalism, but also desire to learn, to investigate, to understand. Waldman's first novel, *The Submission*, explores the aftereffects of 9/11 on American soil, imagining what might happen if a Muslim-American wins a blind competition to design a Ground Zero Memorial. *A Door in the Earth* is her second novel.*

**Lauren Johnson:** You worked as a reporter for a number of years with the *New York Times* and covered both ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as the war overseas for a few years. I'd love to hear you talk a little about what led you to pursue journalism to begin with and how your experiences reporting after 9/11 shaped your perspective as a writer.

**Amy Waldman:** I finished college and didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I was interested in writing, film, but it was all fairly vague. And then I ended up moving to South Africa a year after graduation. First, I was volunteering there in a university—teaching and helping in other ways, and then I began doing some freelance reporting. It was 1992, 1993, so apartheid was ending. It was a very exciting time in the country's history, and so partly I felt like being a reporter gave me a way to go witness all of this, gave me a reason to

be going to rallies and protests. I have a strong interest in social justice, so it was a way to write about things I cared about. I sort of felt like I backed into journalism a little bit. But then felt like, *Okay, this is what I want to do.*

I came back from South Africa, worked at the magazine *Washington Monthly*, then went to the *New York Times* and spent five years writing about New York City. And then 9/11. I was in New York for about six weeks afterward covering the aftermath and then was sent overseas . . . I ended up in Afghanistan in November 2001, then went back repeatedly over the next few years. It was, obviously, a much more peaceful time there. There was a lot more freedom of movement. I went to Helmand and places that within a few years it was much more dangerous to go to. So I had, I think, a very personal, visceral sense of what was happening with the war because I had seen this window of optimism and openness, and then watched it closing.

I was actually briefly sent to Iraq after the invasion. And I think that was really informative for me, too—in registering all the ways that diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, but also the sense of an occupation was much more palpable there. I think Afghanistan did have this identity much more as the ‘good war,’ and our reasons for being there were clearer. And yet, it helped me see certain parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan and our presence in both places. Also just watching things start to sour. In Iraq I felt them start to sour very quickly. I was there maybe two months at the most, and within that time I saw the change. Afghanistan, it was much slower – the disillusionment that built, among Afghans, but also my sense is even within the military, and for reporters as well. Even once I left the region I followed really closely what was happening with the war and our presence there and just felt very confused by it. I guess it’s the simplest way to put it. You know, more and more this sense that there was—and frankly is—no good solution to this, and

that we hadn't thought through where this was going.

I think that's a very long way of saying that all of my post-9/11 experience fed into the first novel I wrote. *The Submission* is much more about America and how 9/11 changed us at home. I'm interested in, even in fiction, moral questions and the choices we have to make both as a society and individuals about how to answer these moral questions. The first novel came out of reporting in America and reporting abroad and the ideas of: What did we want to be as a country in the wake of 9/11? What were our values? What should change? What should stay the same? And then for individuals, how did your personal, political, psychological history weigh into how you answer these questions?

I really loved Afghanistan as a country. I always loved going there. I loved the people that I met and people that I worked with. I was good friends with a lot of our interpreters there. I felt anguish about what I saw happening. [*A Door in the Earth*] is, in a way, another chapter of what I had started with the first novel: who we are at home. Afghanistan was where I wanted to try to understand who and what we are abroad.

I also felt like 9/11 created this whole new set of tropes and ideas and conditions about who we imagined ourselves to be. *Three Cups of Tea* I think was so popular because it fit into that idea of who we think we are. I was interested in idealism, even going back to when I went to South Africa as a young person. I kind of love that impulse in Americans, to want to go and help abroad. But I also think as I've gotten older I question it more and see it as much more complicated, and I don't have as clear a sense of how to think about it. Fiction for me is a good place to work out things that I don't know the answers to, or don't exactly know how to think about. So that all fed into this novel. That was a very long answer.

**Lauren Johnson:** I appreciate long answers because these are

challenging things to think about, and I don't think there is an easy answer a lot of times. I heard that for *The Submission* the idea kind of lodged itself in your brain, and you had initially shelved it while you were working as a journalist. Then it wouldn't stop gnawing at you so you decided to listen to it, and you stopped working for the *Times* and wrote the novel. Was the seed for *A Door in the Earth* similar to that? Was it an obsession, for lack of better words?

**Amy Waldman:** Yeah, it actually was. I had not read *Three Cups of Tea*, and then Jon Krakauer published *Three Cups of Deceit* and 60 Minutes did its report, and I became completely obsessed with the entire thing. So I read *Three Cups of Tea* at that point. I wasn't even that interested in [Greg Mortenson] as a person or what his motivations were, I was more interested in why did so many people buy into this myth? What did that say about us? I felt like it got at something pretty deep, both in who we are as Americans, but also in the War on Terror, the war in Afghanistan. I couldn't easily articulate what that was, but I felt like it really went to the heart of something there. And then I also was really interested in what would it feel like to believe in this cause or this person and then find out that in all kinds of ways, it wasn't what you thought it had been.

I spent a lot of time online reading reactions from people after *Three Cups of Tea* was exposed. I was interested in the people who were really angry at Krakauer for exposing him—this idea that we need heroes, and it's wrong to tear them down, even if they're false heroes. But then I would find, say, a 14 year old girl who would be like, '*I'm crushed, because I really believed in this and raised money for this.*' What would that feel like to be that young and having this experience? I was trying to make sense of why was it so popular, why did the military latch on to it, and then what would it feel like to find out that basically you've hitched your idealism—which is a genuine feeling—to something that's false. I kept meeting

people who said, 'Oh, I went into education because of that book,' or 'My brother went to help in Pakistan because of that book.' So, if something's not true but it's motivating people to help, that's really interesting as well. So anyway, it just seemed very messy and interesting. I usually feel like when I become obsessed with something, that's fertile territory for a novel.

**Lauren Johnson:** And why did you choose 2009 as a time frame in particular?

**Amy Waldman:** Initially, I think I didn't have the novel set in any particular year. When I'm writing fiction I'm always torn, especially the kind of fiction I do—at least everything I've done so far—which is so obviously spun off reality in some way. I'm always torn about how specific do I want to get? In *The Submission*, I don't say it's 9/11. I left it vague in terms of what the attack in question was. I never use the term 9/11 or September 11 anywhere in the book, because I felt like it just takes you out of a fictional world into one that immediately you're thinking about all your associations and experiences with 9/11.

In this case, the more I thought about it and started looking at different points in the war, I just felt like it actually does matter to be specific. That year was so interesting to me, for all the reasons I weave into the novel: everything from Obama becoming president and rethinking the whole Afghanistan strategy, to the number of casualties of American soldiers rising, to growing public disenchantment at home. . . It really just felt like that was a pivotal year in the war. And so it seems a good pivot point to set the story when all of this is going on.

**Lauren Johnson:** And it's definitely rooted in reality. You mentioned a lot of things that took place that year, including the airstrike in Farah that led to massive civilian casualties, and the attack in Kunduz in November where the

British reporter was kidnapped. I appreciated all those little reminders. And I think someone who maybe didn't have an obsession with that region in 2009-2010 would still pick up on those elements, that it feels very grounded.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes, but I think, equally though, someone who didn't know anything—in a way it wouldn't matter. It's almost like I'm speaking to you as a reader in one way and another reader in another way. I'm putting all those things in; to me, it's exciting that you would get them and register them and their significance. But equally, I know there's a lot of readers who will not have paid any attention to any of those things. I kind of like tucking in reality into fiction. I like that people who get it will get it. But I also feel like, if you don't, that's fine, too. It doesn't matter if you never read the news about Afghanistan, I want it to affect you emotionally. Maybe there's a way putting it in fiction will do that, even if you turn off the news.

**Lauren Johnson:** Yeah, absolutely. It grounds it but also has those emotional reverberations, and I think particularly the way that you approach it from a new perspective. That's one of the things that I really appreciate about the book as a whole is all the different perspectives. You're not looking at this from the traditional whitewashed American lens that most people are used to viewing war through. You weave in all these different points of view against the backdrop of war that captures a fuller spectrum. There's Parveen—and I would love to hear more about your choice to make her your protagonist—and then all the colorful characters she interacts with along the way.

**Amy Waldman:** Originally there was going to be, I think, five different sections, and each would have a different central character. Aziz, the [military] interpreter, and Trotter [the American military commander] were going to have one section, and [Parveen] was going to have another section. But when I started working on it, it just didn't work. And so I ended up

kind of folding everything into her story. And it really to me became about her story, but braided together with all these other people. I wanted someone young, because I feel like that is a point when you are more open to influences, and partly it's a novel about her wrestling with all these adult figures and mentors and influences, and kind of coming to terms with them.

The idea of a young American going abroad is a very familiar story and has been done in fiction. I decided to make her Afghan-American, partly because I wanted her to have some understanding of the culture and speak the language. I feel like every American in some way has a place that they are connected to—it can be very immediate, it can be very distant—and they're sort of these ghost places for us where you imagine a strong connection. And then what happens when that's tested and you have to come face to face with real people? Also, I'm always very interested in people who are kind of caught in between. With her and Aziz, I felt like they were both in that situation. The question of allegiances: even if that's clear in your own mind, how do other people perceive you?

**Lauren Johnson:** You cover a really impressive spectrum. With Parveen herself, with the family she's staying with, Waheed's family, who are mostly just trying to exist and live their lives in this remote Afghan village, and then Colonel Trotter and these American soldiers who are also inspired by Gideon Crane's book and the "kind power" notion. And I'm glad you mentioned Aziz, I think he was my favorite character.

**Amy Waldman:** Oh, that makes me happy!

**Lauren Johnson:** I think interpreters don't get a lot of attention for the precarious position that they're in, straddling these different worlds and competing agendas. I really appreciated that perspective. But again, it's how you weave everyone all together. Parveen observes at one point

that her “sympathies kept tilting back and forth, never finding a perfect place to rest.” I have to say, that’s how I felt throughout the book, not really comfortable aligning myself 100% with any character. And I think that’s in large part because of all these different perspectives that you invite us to consider. Would you say that one of your messages is that there *is* no comfortable place to rest in war?

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. Although I’d maybe say there’s no comfortable place to rest in life!

**Lauren Johnson:** That’s a fair edit!

**Amy Waldman:** But yes, I think that’s true. When I was younger I was very certain about a lot of things, and I think I’ve become less and less so, which is often frustrating. There are things—and I could go on at great length—where I have a very strong sense of what’s right and what’s wrong, including in war. I mean, there’s a lot happening right now in Afghanistan that I think is egregiously wrong. But that feeling you have is exactly what I wanted. That certainly in that situation there’s nobody’s saintly or perfect, whether that’s because they’re trying to survive or that’s human nature. There shouldn’t be a comfortable place to rest. Certainly in war.

**Lauren Johnson:** I grew up in the era of chick flicks where in 90 minutes someone falls in love and lives happily ever after; it’s just this clean-cut story line. As I’ve gotten older I realized that’s not the case, basically ever. And that’s part of coming of age. To me, a lot of Parveen’s experience read like a coming of age story also.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes.

**Lauren Johnson:** She’s confronted with the fact that life isn’t black and white, that there are shades of gray everywhere, and it’s uncomfortable. Your decisions have ripple effects, and even if you’re making them with good intentions, you can’t count on them having positive outcomes.

**Amy Waldman:** The more I worked on this novel, that idea became something I thought about more and more. Just what do our actions do? In the name of whatever cause you believe in, how do you affect other people? That's the beauty of being alive—how interconnected we all are—but also it's very hard to live without having repercussions in the lives of others, whether you want to or not. And the gap between our ideas of ourselves in the world and our realities in the world interests me too. How do you ever stand far enough outside yourself to even see how you affect others?

**Lauren Johnson:** Having not been back to the country in so long, you render the landscape so strikingly. And you also invite readers into this very intimate setting of an Afghan home, which is mostly closed off to us here in the West. I would love to hear more about how you were able to capture the spaces and characters authentically.

**Amy Waldman:** The landscape there made such an impression on me. Some of that just stayed with me, and then I certainly drew on the reporting I had done when I was there. There's little lines and things people said to me when I was a reporter that I probably wove into the book or gave me the seed for an idea. So I had that base for having spent time there, but it was very difficult not being able to—or, I should say, deciding not to—go back and research. Instagram I love for the visual reminders it provides, and there's so many photographers doing great work there. I read a lot of books, including *Afghan Post* [by Wrath-Bearing Tree co-editor Adrian Bonenberger]. There are quite a few documentaries that I watched, and I also did a lot of research on maternal mortality. I read [military blogs] for more logistical detail. Anthropology—there's not so much that's super recent just because of conditions, but there's enough to be really helpful. There's a lot out there. But it's not the same as going back.

**Lauren Johnson:** I'm glad you mentioned maternal mortality.

Could you talk about why you chose to focus on that as one of the central issues? [Crane, the humanitarian, witnesses an Afghan woman's death in childbirth, and in response decides to build a clinic for women in her village]

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. So once I came up with the idea that, in a way, it's a book about a book—the influence of this memoir—I was trying to think, who is this person who wrote it? What was he doing in this village? I don't remember exactly what the spark was for that, but as soon as I thought about it, it totally made sense. I mean, maternal mortality is a huge issue in Afghanistan, and it also was a way to get at one of the complicated things about this war, which is the whole issue of women. Are we there to save them or protect them? Is that a true reason or a pretext? And also the contradictions embedded in that—for example the way we've mostly allowed women to be left out of the peace process.

And so I wanted to see how those contradictions in America's relationship to women in Afghanistan would play out in the story I'd invented. What is PR and what is a legitimate desire to help? What is our obligation? I felt like it was a way for [Parveen] to connect with women in the village as well. And then all the complexities around—and again this came out of my reporting, some of it at least—who can treat women, medically, and how does that work? So, it just seemed like the issue to build the novel around.

**Lauren Johnson:** And one of the other ways that Parveen ends up connecting with the women in the village is in reading them Crane's book, which is such an interesting layer. She quickly realizes that events and descriptions in the book don't line up with the reality of the people who were living it. Aside from that, the moments in those scenes where we get to see the women interacting away from the men and their daily routines was a really powerful image. They take their burqas off and they're teasing each other, and harping on their husbands, talking about sex; just women being women. I think that's an

important element, too, that gets lost in the politicized discussions of war: just people being people and the connective power of that.

**Amy Waldman:** I definitely wanted to have that. I would say the war was the thing that propelled the novel into existence, and yet I didn't want it only to be about that. And I did feel strongly that all the reasons I really loved Afghanistan, I wanted to try to get some of that across. And, you know, people everywhere are just funny and saucy and smart. Someone once said to me that it's much easier to focus on the differences with people in other cultures than it is the similarities. That was probably in the context of being a reporter, but I think it's true in fiction too, that it's very easy to exoticize everything that's different or extreme in another culture. But the truer portrait is capturing at least some of ways that people are quite similar anywhere: their friendships, their relationships, their desires—all of that.

**Lauren Johnson:** Were any of the moments that occur in the book echoes of experiences you had in Afghanistan?

**Amy Waldman:** Good question. Funny, at this point it's so hard to even sort everything out. There are things that were not experiences, but were taken from the news. [One incident, removed to avoid spoilers] is based on this tiny, one paragraph news item that I found years ago . . . that's always really haunted me. Frankly, the Konduz incident—the translator who died was someone I was really close to and had worked with, so that never went away for me. I had very strong feelings about it and wanted it not forgotten. And then there would just be little things. Like when Waheed says to Parveen, “You know, I wish my wives could do what you do.” When I was in a Pashtun area reporting, this man said that to me: “I wish my wife could do what you do.” I just never expected to hear that there.

There are little things that in one way or another either are

my experience or things I read. [I read a paper] about the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, the psychology of an occupation, and that fed into my thinking: this idea of, is an old man just an old man or is he dangerous? What does it mean to be an occupying power? As the fear increases, how do you start to interact with the population? I feel like that's a central tension of our presence there: Supposedly trying to help and win hearts and minds, and yet we're also terrified and have no idea who to trust. How do those things coexist with each other?

**Lauren Johnson:** I actually wrote down a line where Parveen wonders: "What did it mean to offer help to people you don't trust?"

**Amy Waldman:** Exactly.

**Lauren Johnson:** That was certainly something on my mind when I was there, and I'm sure many of my compatriots as well. That really complicated mixture of the inherent power that comes with being an American military member, but also the vulnerability that comes with it, and just the pervasive lack of knowledge and understanding, and then the rules that are being dictated by people who aren't actually on the ground—and you captured that web in really kind of an appropriately discombobulating way.

**Amy Waldman:** That's interesting, that idea that you are not making the rules. And also that, in this novel, and it seemed to me there, like the rules were always changing.

**Lauren Johnson:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Amy Waldman:** I think for most Americans and Afghans that's incredibly confusing. Because there's no consistent relationship. And even as a soldier, you're still a human being, and you're told one day to perceive the people in this place a certain way, and the next day you're told to perceive them in a different way. How are you supposed to reconcile

that internally as well as externally in your actions and your reactions?

**Lauren Johnson:** Right. And how are you supposed to inspire trust in an interaction when you're going in with body armor and two weapons and ballistic sunglasses and fourteen ton vehicles? So many paradoxes inherent in war.

**Amy Waldman:** Yes, paradox is the word.

**Lauren Johnson:** The fact that this war has now been going on for 18 years, I think it's fitting that this is not a book that wraps up neatly at the end. Parveen has this great line that it is "a war shaggy with loose ends." Which does not satisfy my idealistic American desire for happy ending, but it's also very appropriate. Was that a conscious decision?

**Amy Waldman:** Yes. It was hard for me to imagine a happy ending, to be honest. I think this is a very slow moving, epic tragedy and it's gotten so much worse—for Afghans, in particular, in the past few years. I just felt like the most honest ending was one that was unresolved . . . It's more just, we have to think about these things. We can't just be congratulating ourselves all the time on being the saviors of the world. Not that we really are any more. In some ways I feel like I'm writing about history more than the present.

[I also want to] touch on the role anger, for lack of a better word, played in the writing of *A Door in the Earth*. So many things about the war that were treated as normal—the lies or withholding of information; the false rhetoric about success or victory in the war; the sending of soldiers on missions or to outposts that made no sense or seemed destined to fail; the loss of life on both sides, of both soldiers and civilians, and the lack of questioning whether those deaths, or lifelong injuries, were a cost worth paying—seemed wrong to me, and the novel was a way to work through that. I think one problem with the civilian-military divide is that civilians don't think

they have the right to ask these kinds of questions, because we're not serving, when for me that's the reason we're obligated to ask them.

**Lauren Johnson:** These two novels, it seems, very organically fed into each other. Do you think you'll stay in that zone, about the aftereffects of 9/11? Or is that still to be determined?

**Amy Waldman:** I think it's to be determined. I mean, sometimes I think there must be a trilogy. It seems like these things always come in threes, but I don't know what the third one would be. And I definitely don't want to force it. Both these books really just came out of, as we talked about, kind of obsessions. And so, I feel like if I don't have another obsession, I will not write another novel along those lines. I might write another novel, but it would be totally different. And yet, I clearly am consumed by post-9/11 America and the War on Terror. And since it never seems to end, I guess eventually there may be another novel. But I would rather it all ended and then I could write about something else.

**Lauren Johnson:** Do you ever see yourself going back to journalism?

**Amy Waldman:** I don't think I would go back to the kind of journalism I was doing. I could see doing more essay writing. I keep thinking about how to write about what's going on now . . . The Afghan deaths, both soldiers and civilians, and the numbers—how extreme that has become. And also the number of airstrikes the US is now carrying out there, and how little information there is about that—I think that's what's really disturbing, that it almost becoming this secret war where we just have very little sense of what's going on and who's doing what. But I don't want to write a novel about that. It would be more an essay or op-ed. So that's a long way of saying I don't know.

**Lauren Johnson:** Well you can be sure that I will be reading everything you ever write from now on.

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## **Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow**



*Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents.*

*Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country, offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.*

*At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.*

*The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been*

*published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.*

*Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after. Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.*

*While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background. Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.*

*How many books have you helped bring to the market?*

*I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would*

take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

*Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?*

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the

right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

*You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.*

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge

someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

*What kind of work are you most attracted to?*

✘ The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer. The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all day to editors and hearing ... 'you know that's great but it's

not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it. And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It's like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it's a no brainer and the buyer says 'of course it's this house'. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

*What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?*

A lot of writers, especially if they're new, will completely ignore what you've put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I've been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I'm very forgiving and I don't automatically reject anyone ... unless they describe the work as a crime thriller ... because I'm not subjecting myself to that. I'm not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it's the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn't hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I'm beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn't slam dunk there, agents don't have the time or they don't have the skill to give the work the developmental edit it needs.

*I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she knew. The editor told her he'd read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:*

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

*When did you officially start as an agent?*

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit.

I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

*What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your decision?*

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your

agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way they're going to get to these publishers.

*This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?*

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I'd look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn't have the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, "You've checked out everybody else all morning. Aren't you even going to ask me any questions?"

Remember, this is 1977, I'd never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, "You have women in the Marine Corps?" And he said, "Come on in here. Let me show you a film." Three weeks later I'm at Parris Island.

*How long were you in the Marines?*

Ten years.



*Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.*

*Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you're close to placing something now?*

I feel like I'm getting so much good feedback from my romance writer's book. It's the military version of *The Ya Ya Sisterhood*. It's really intriguing, it's really good, and it's written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month ... four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery ... it's not bloody ... it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest,

I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

*That's unheard of!*

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news. It's not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they're blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don't have anything to compare it to, so they're just ...'Thanks for the update!'

I know what they're feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they're not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

*It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?*

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I've had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn't an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I'm the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, 'You've got to read this.' It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It's joyful. It really is.

*Is there anything you wish I'd asked that I haven't asked you?*

I'm really impressed with what I'm reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like ... Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire the attitude of writers today, which is ... 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

*I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?*

*At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooing them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.*

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook

groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work ... and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own market. I love it!

*It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.*

*Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at [Tracy@TracyCrow.com](mailto:Tracy@TracyCrow.com) and include QUERY in the subject line.*

✘ **Tracy Crow** is host and producer of the podcast, Accept Your

Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC, and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell; the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

### **The interviewer- M. L. Doyle**

✘ M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* and

The General's Ambition in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned The Bonding Spell and The Bonding Blade, in a planned three-book Desert Goddess urban fantasy series. Limited Partnerships, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, I'm Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. A Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer was published in 2015.

Mary's essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in The War Horse, The Goodman project, and O-Dark Thirty. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

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## **Landslide / For Byron Who Was**

# Separated From His Father At The US-Mexico Border



When you left  
Guatemala. Crossed the border  
Into Mexico. With your father or  
How there was a smuggler. Who  
Took you. On foot. All the way to  
America. How the truth is. When  
You went down the road and off  
Of the mountain. Where you live.  
Have always lived. How you did  
Not think. *I will ever come back.*  
And now. You cannot get back.  
How your mother and father  
Cannot get you back. And when  
You got here. Crossed over the  
Border and into California. How  
Border Patrol picked you up and  
Your father. How they sent him

Back. Back to Guatemala. They  
Deported him. But without you.  
Because they kept you. Keeping  
You in detention. And in Texas or  
How. Texas is so far away. Away  
From your father. Your mother.  
Sister or the mountain. And you  
Were only seven years old when  
You left. Left Guatemala. Or how  
You are eight now. Because you  
Have been. Here. And detained.  
In Texas. Or how it has been five.  
Five months. They have kept you.  
And not let you go home.  
I want you to know. This  
Was not supposed to happen to  
You. How they made your father  
Sign a form in a language he did  
Not know how to read. Or how.  
They told him. Told your father  
*If you sign it.* They would bring  
You back to him. And *who will*

*Hug him.* Your father says. Who  
Will hug you now. Now that you  
Are still here and he is back. In  
Guatemala. On a mountain. Or  
Without you.

And he stretches your clothes.  
Each day and across a bed. The  
Bed where you used to sleep.

How he cannot stop saying *how*  
You are very small.

And *how much.*

That this is *too much.* This is just

*Too much pain.* And your mother

Says that when. They are able to

Call you. How they can see you.

Over video and it is hard. Hard

To connect. How you look away

And off to the side. Whispering.

Whispering *it is dangerous here.*

And I know.

I know what some people will say.

When your father tell the story

About why he did it Took you all  
The way across Mexico. And into  
America. Across the border. How  
He says he did it for you. So you  
Can have *a better life*.

How they will say his reasons  
Were *economic*. And how. How  
You were not fleeing violence.  
How there was no danger. And  
It was a few years ago. When  
There was a landslide. And  
Land slid down your mountain.  
How it was falling or rushing  
Down. And it covered houses  
And people.

Or how it buried everything.  
And a landslide happens when  
The stress of a mountain  
Outweighs its resistance.

Or when your father does not  
Know. If there will be another  
Job. If he can keep you fed or

Alive. When he knows there  
Is no more. Clean water. For  
You to drink. Living like this.  
It is waiting.  
Waiting for the land to slide  
Down. And bury you. Alive.  
Because poverty is always  
Dangerous.  
But your father knows now.  
He knows that  
What is even more dangerous  
Is a country without a heart.  
This heartless country.  
That took you away from him.  
And will not. Will not.  
Give you back.

*This poem is part of [Border of Heartbreak](#) – a collection of poems written for children separated at the US-Mexico border. It was written after reading a [New York Times article](#) about Byron – an eight year old boy who was separated from his father at the US-Mexico border in May 2018, detained, and kept in detention even after his father was deported back to Guatemala. Byron was held in US detention for eight months.*

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# New Fiction from Amy Waldman: 'A Door in the Earth'

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## **From Chapter Four: The Distant Fire**

On her third night, Parveen stayed in the main room with Waheed and Jamshid after dinner while the women and girls went to clean up. The radio was on, tuned to the BBC Persian service, as it was each evening, radio being the sole medium by which news of the outside world regularly came to the village. An Air France flight with two hundred and twenty-eight people aboard had vanished; a South African woman claiming to be one hundred and thirty-four, and thus the world's oldest person, had died; General Motors had filed for bankruptcy—the family solemnly took it all in . . .

Most of the news they received, however, was about Afghanistan, its politics and its war, reports of which drifted in through the radio like ash from a distant fire. In every other way the war felt remote, as if it were happening in another country. This was a relief to Parveen, for in Kabul it had seemed uncomfortably close, like metal woven through the fabric of the city—a hard, cold presence you kept butting up against in the course of normal life. Her relatives, as they took her to museums and palaces, a Mughal garden, the British cemetery, and the zoo, not to mention internet cafés, kebab joints, and the homes of many distant relatives, often had to pull over for the military convoys that bulled their way through the streets. They pointed out the blast craters

left by insurgents' bombs, and navigated around the barricades and walls meant to guard against them. Western embassies and Afghan government offices had all clawed out so much territory for their own self-protection that to Parveen, the city read like an aggregation of security fiefdoms. A reprieve her cousins had planned—a picnic in Istalif, a famously beautiful spot north of Kabul—was canceled after a suicide bomber attacked a NATO convoy on the road they would have taken. Such disruptions were not routine, for they could not be predicted, but neither were they surprising. To Kabul's residents, the war was like a giant pothole that you kept swerving around until you fell into it.



Each night she and her relatives gathered in the living room to watch television, where a more disturbing face of the war was playing out. A few weeks before Parveen arrived in Afghanistan, an air strike in the western province of Farah, some five hundred and fifty miles away from Kabul, had killed more civilians, it was said, than any similar incident since 2001. It made the news in America, but Parveen, preoccupied by preparing for graduation and her journey, had barely noted it at the time. Now she couldn't escape it. It was believed that a hundred or more people had been killed, and most of them were children, mainly girls. Their bodies had been so badly shredded that not all of the pieces could be recovered, leaving Parveen with a new and chilling understanding of the word *remains*. Then there were the wounded children in their hospital beds, including three sisters she couldn't forget. They had singed hair and charred skin that had been smeared with yellow ointment. The youngest, just five, clutched a glass of milk.

"Why is your new president escalating the war?" her aunt asked. "We hoped he would find a way to end it."

The politeness of her voice hid her emotions. Pessimism?

Resignation? Suppressed rage? As the sole American in her relatives' house, Parveen felt culpable. She remembered her Berkeley friends savaging the military. How could she argue with them now? She'd expected to find clarity about the war by coming to Afghanistan. Instead, the blur had worsened.

Now, on the radio that Waheed had taken off the shelf and set, like a small pet, to his right, came a discussion of the Farah air strike, in which the U.S. government had at last conceded significant errors. Unable to help herself, Parveen began to speak about it, to describe, as best she could in Dari, the images she had seen on television in Kabul. The girls in the hospital. The men pawing through rubble looking for family members. A mass grave.

The females had rejoined the men and Parveen saw the twins, Adeila and Aakila, staring at her in shock and clutching each other's hands. She could have been describing them, she realized with horror, when she talked about the sisters. She'd given the twins, perhaps the whole family, a new sense of their fragility, their vulnerability, and she wished she could undo that. Although, unlike the radio reporters, she'd witnessed nothing other than what she'd seen on television and the internet, the family reacted as if she were the one offering a firsthand account of the air strike, maybe because this was a place with no screens, to where images didn't travel. Or maybe the family was rapt because of the guilt she confessed to—an admission that embarrassed her. It seemed so American, to act as if everything was about her own emotions and be so shocked by the barbarism of war in a country whose past three decades had been consumed by it. And yet she wanted to insist, but didn't for fear of sounding condescending, that it wasn't silly to expect that your government would act decently and to be crushed when it didn't.

The family looked to Waheed, the patriarch, to say something. He turned down the radio and began to speak, occasionally stroking his beard as a much older man might. The village had

a great commander, he said, who'd fought with the mujahideen against the Soviets. This man, Amanullah, had gone into the mountains for years, eluding the Russians who were hunting him, surviving on roots, nuts, mulberries. He'd lost a hand in battle and he'd gained great fame. Because of his valor, Waheed added, almost as an aside, the village forgave him his sins.

Parveen knew about the commander, for he'd figured prominently in Crane's book. She also knew his sins. In the late 1990s, he'd lent his courage to the Taliban, becoming a commander for them and terrifying the region for a time. Amanullah had whipped women, beheaded men, and run a private dungeon. And he'd kidnapped Crane during his stay in the village.

Waheed didn't speak of any of this. How painful it must have been for the villagers when their hero joined the Taliban, Parveen thought; too painful to be spoken of. No, Waheed talked only of Commander Amanullah's exploits against the Russians until he reached his point, which was that if Amanullah decided the Americans were an enemy, he'd take up arms to fight them, and many villagers would follow him. Not that anyone wanted that, he added. They wanted to stay here and farm. For the villagers, too, this war felt like another country. No one here had even gone to fight for the government, although that was mostly because they couldn't meet the literacy requirement for soldiers.

"But the Americans should be aware," Waheed said, "that this soil has never been hospitable to foreigners."

It was all Parveen could do not to roll her eyes. This was the one cliché about Afghanistan that every American seemed to know.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon Waheed came back from the fields and announced, without explanation, that they were going to the

clinic that Gideon Crane had built in the village, and where Parveen was planning to volunteer. Parveen wondered if she'd passed some test. From a hook near the door, he lifted a ring with a pair of heavy, ornate keys. Nearby hung a row of emerald-green chadris, what Americans called burqas: the head-to-toe coverings, with netting over the eyes, that the women wore when they left the house. Parveen did not take one—her Kabul relatives had told her that, not being from the village, she should feel no obligation to wear one—yet their mere presence shadowed her into the yard. She chafed at the cloister she'd been living in. The women and girls watched her go.

When she stepped out of the compound she felt free. This was her first clear view of her surroundings, unobscured by walls. The village lay in a long, verdant valley that spilled out from between the feet of the mountains. The valley floor, flat and rich in river silt, had been given over to fields shaped into neat squares or sweeping crescents. Wheat and corn, rye and barley, rice—each claimed its own shade of green. The land had been terraced, and on higher levels there were orchards: almond, apricot, mulberry, peach, many trees enveloped in clouds of pale pink blossoms. The houses, built from tawny mud bricks, stepped up a low stony ridge, their intricate patterning guarding the privacy of each family. And ringing it all, the mountains.

As Parveen was getting her first view of the valley, the villagers were getting their first view of her. When she was just steps from the compound, a passel of boys and a few men gathered around, as if they'd been waiting these past days for her to emerge. Her hair was covered but not her face, and it was her face they stared at, their gazes pinning her in place. Her seconds of freedom vanished.

“Have you never seen a woman's face?” Waheed shouted. “Don't you have mothers?”

His assertiveness on her behalf surprised her, although she sensed that some of his irritation was directed at her for putting him in this situation. The boys didn't move until Waheed took a step toward them and clinked the large keys. Then they scattered, continuing to spy on Parveen from behind walls and around corners. Once she and Waheed reached the bazaar, the boys didn't bother to hide. They stood a few feet away and gawked.

The bazaar was a simple place: two rows of facing stalls, about fifteen all told, propped up by stripped tree limbs, with corrugated tin roofs overhead. The main path was mucky from the buckets of water merchants tossed on it to keep down the dust. Waheed gave one-word self-evident descriptions for each stall they passed: butcher (a skinned sheep hung on a hook, its bare pink flesh flecked with black flies), baker (loaves were stacked for those too poor to buy ovens), and tinsmith, a maker of pots and pans. There was a shop with a desultory hodgepodge of stale biscuits, cigarettes, expired medicines, and pirated DVDs (although no one in the village had a DVD player) of *2 Fast 2 Furious* and Bollywood films, merchandise that had probably been bought and sold a hundred times between Kabul and here, where it had washed up, as an ocean deposits plastic far from its source, to gather dust.

"Some of those things have been here since I was a child," Waheed joked.

The shopkeeper laughed a little too hard. People greeted Waheed deferentially, as if he were someone important, and Parveen wondered if this was because she was with him. He bantered with them but did not introduce her.

The blacksmith worked outdoors, next to his forge, which was made from mud. The coals within it glowed orange, and a large kettle sat atop it. The blacksmith was an inquisitive graybeard with sweat trickling down his face, but it was the man next to him who caught Parveen's attention. He was as big

in the belly as he was in the shoulders and had a hennaed beard, a gray turban wrapped expertly around his head, and in place of one hand a metal hook. With his intact hand he was popping pistachios into his mouth, then loudly biting them with a sound like knuckles being cracked. The shells he ejected with a buffoonish *pfft*. This was Commander Amanullah.

She looked in vain for signs of the terror he had inflicted on so many or of his famed courage. What she saw was a grizzled aging man, hardly in fighting shape. Waheed's suggestion that he could lead an army against the Americans seemed comical, a pantomime of threat. But when someone changes slowly before your eyes, Parveen thought, the change can be hard to see.

"You are the American doctor," the commander said after Waheed had introduced Parveen.

She was not a doctor, she clarified.

"Then who are you? We need a doctor here."

"The clinic doesn't have one?"

"The lady doctor comes once a week. We've instructed our wives to get sick or give birth only on Wednesday, but they don't always listen."

The small crowd of men who had gathered laughed; Parveen didn't find it funny. She was about to tell the commander so but Waheed had disappeared, so she held her tongue and instead asked, "Didn't Gideon Crane hire a full-time doctor?"

"I don't know what Dr. Gideon has done." Like Issa, the villagers called Crane Dr. Gideon, she noticed.

Parveen said that she would report the situation with the doctor to Crane's foundation.

"You work for Dr. Gideon?"

"I've come to be helpful to him," she said, uncomfortable with this elision but uncertain what to say instead.

The commander asked if Parveen spoke English. The question struck her as hilarious until she remembered that of course they had no way to know what language, other than Dari, she spoke. Yes, she said and smiled.

"Let's hear some," the commander said in Dari.

She stuttered, "H-hello, how are you?" and was surprised to hear how strange English sounded to her.

"Yes, she speaks English," he confirmed in Dari to his minions, who laughed because the commander himself didn't speak the language and had no idea what Parveen had said. He asked her if she'd learned Dari in school.

No, she told him. Her family was from Afghanistan, from Kabul, where she'd been born. Her parents had left in 1988.

"So they left with the Russians. Were they Communists, your parents?"

"No! That's just when their visa came through. They were trying to escape the Soviets. No one knew they would withdraw—"

"The little bird has quite a sharp beak," he said, amused by Parveen's outrage.

They'd left everything behind, she went on. They'd started over in America with nothing. Her father, for several years, had driven an ice-cream truck. That this was humiliating for Ashraf didn't register on the villagers' faces. An ice-cream truck was as mythical here as a unicorn. Truck drivers earned good money.

"The suffering of those who left can't compare with that of those who stayed," Amanullah said, and Parveen fell silent.

"I've lost two sons to war. And this." He waved his hook.

"I'm sorry about your sons," she said, unsure whether to offer condolences for his hand.

"It's a blessing to lose sons fighting for God," he said.

"Of course." She rebuked herself. She should have known that was how he would see it.

There was an awkward silence. The blacksmith picked up his hammer and began to bang on his anvil. Commander Amanullah looked away, as if to say he was done with Parveen.

She could see the clinic from the bazaar. She couldn't *not* see it, since it was two stories high and painted a white so bright that it looked primed for sunburn. It was completely out of scale and character to the rest of the village. If she hadn't known better, Parveen would have figured the building for a wedding hall planted by some entrepreneurial provincial. It looked like the photo in Crane's TED Talk, but it was much grander than the photo in the book, which she had recently perused.

She mentioned this to Waheed, who laughed; the clinic looked smaller in the book because it *had* been smaller. Originally the structure had been just one story with a few rooms, he said. But after the book was published and donations poured in, that clinic was torn down and a new one built at three or four times the original size.

From what Issa had told him, there were three warehouses in Dubai full of unused equipment, Waheed said. "The donations kept coming; the clinic had to keep growing." He sounded almost sad, but his eyes were creased with amusement, as if he understood his own illogic. Supplies were brought in, sometimes by helicopters, he continued. A high wall, also white, surrounded the clinic. Both wall and clinic were repainted at least twice a year, because of the dust, Waheed

said, then added: "It can never be defeated."

"Dr. Gideon wants the clinic to look sanitary," Parveen said, feeling obliged to explain for him.

With one of the large keys Waheed unlocked the metal door that led into the clinic's courtyard. Among the children who had tailed Parveen and him, only Waheed's were permitted inside. The rest were harried off. The courtyard was large and dusty, unadorned except for a single shade tree that stood slightly off-center. In the late-afternoon light, its shadow stretched diagonally across the empty space.

"So the doctor comes once a week? Isn't the clinic open any other time?"

Waheed was using the other large key to unlock the building door. "If there's no doctor, it stays locked," he said. "The equipment here is more valuable than all the fields in this village. And what good's a clinic without a doctor?"

His question struck Parveen as unintentionally profound, more profound than anything in Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, which they'd read in Professor Banerjee's class. Parveen had been taken with the idea of the "medical gaze," which was how Foucault described the way doctors, even as they were elevated to sages, reduced patients to bodies alone. She'd been curious to see how that would play out here, in the developing world. That there might not be a doctor to bestow a medical gaze had never occurred to her.

The clinic facility itself was good, staggeringly so, Parveen thought. The interior walls were a soothing white and there was a reception desk and several rows of sturdy metal chairs screwed to the floor in a waiting area. The chemical smells—ammonia, bleach, paint—were acute, almost painful. She hadn't smelled chemicals anywhere else in the village except for the diesel that fed Waheed's generator. There were skylights and—this seemed almost miraculous—a light switch, which Parveen

flipped. Nothing happened.

The fuel was saved for when the doctor came, Waheed explained. They couldn't run the generator all the time. After sparking a lantern, he walked Parveen from room to room, beginning upstairs with the ten-bed maternity ward and the adjacent nursery, which held three empty incubators. Downstairs he slung the beam of the lantern into windowless rooms labeled, in both English and Dari, examination, labor, delivery, surgery, and recovery. The equipment looked state-of-the-art. That this pristinely kept temple to health—to modernity—should be in this village, of all places, moved Parveen. If, approaching the clinic, she'd questioned the abandon with which Crane flouted the village context, now she celebrated his refusal to let the village's history or isolation limit its possibilities. The clinic's seeming excess proclaimed these humble villagers to be worthy of the same medical care that Americans were, a message almost as meaningful as the treatment itself.

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## **It Just Keeps Going**

The first time I heard the phrase "Hate Train," I was stationed in Japan with the Navy, attempting to enjoy a bowl of oatmeal. Our previous officer-in-charge (OIC) had finished turning over with his replacement and the new guy was proving to be a micromanaging, all-knowing, pain-in-the-ass. Mind you, I didn't dislike him as a person, he was a nice enough guy. Still, he was awful to work for and his poor leadership, frivolous requests (usually demands), and attempts to force us to endure awkward esprit-de-corp events were a frequent topic of conversation. It was during one of these conversations, early one morning, that the phrase "Hate Train" came up. We

all know what the Hate Train is because we've all been passengers on the Train at one time or another, hidden away behind closed doors or out to lunch, hating on someone who angers or frustrates us by way of their words or actions.

We all board the Train for different reasons. I can tell you why I ride: a fissure between reality and expectations. I remember hearing a lecture once about relational conflict. The point was that frustrations stem from failed expectations. If all week I'm planning to lay around and do nothing on the weekend and my wife suddenly decides to spend the entire weekend with her long-lost college roommate, whom I barely remember from our wedding and haven't seen since (about 8 years now), then the odds are there's going to be a problem.



“Long exposure of a Piccadilly line train leaving Leicester Square station, looking south-southwest.” Copyright Robert Lamb, licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence.

Regardless of why we're frustrated, or where it comes from, there are good and bad ways of handling that frustration. In past versions of this essay, I would have logged the Hate Train under “bad ways” to handle frustration. But, if I've learned anything since I first wrote about the Hate Train, I don't think it's as simple as “good” or “bad.” Like hearing the same story from two rival sources, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

I made a friend riding the Hate Train. For the sake of dispelling ambiguity, we'll call him Tom. Tom and I were stuck in an untenable situation involving a lazy and inept supervisor and, in our desperation, we became close. Granted, we had other things in common, certain personality quirks and interests but, even when we met away from work, usually for coffee, most of our discussions took place on the Hate Train. By the time we were ordering refills, we had moved on to other

topics, but I'd be lying if I said I can remember a conversation that didn't start on the Train. We'd criticize our supervisor for his lack of presence during training exercises or, when he was present, the way he lapped up all the credit for the work we were doing. You know, real "leadership" stuff. I realize complaining isn't a great foundation for a friendship—and this is probably why we aren't friends anymore—but riding the Train, Tom and I latched onto each other. At the time, we genuinely believed that we were the only ones who knew what the other was dealing with.

There were other people I talked to and there were things that I had to overlook about Tom, nuances of character that I chose to tolerate because this was a "friend." We can all relate to that, wanting to see only the best in the people we choose to associate with, because if we realized that the people we associated with were less than perfect, what would that say about us? While in time, the source of our frustration disappeared, that didn't mean we stopped riding the Train.

Unfortunately, after awhile, the Hate Train got old. That's not to say I didn't enjoy my time on the Train with Tom, but I learned there's a limit to the amount of "talk" I can handle before my eyes start to glaze over, even if it's coming from a "friend." There should be more to a friendship than ripping on others for their inadequacies and blunders. And so, in an effort to expand our friendship, when we met for coffee, I tried to get Tom to talk about his family (I have one too), books (I enjoy reading), movies (who doesn't like movies?), or just life in general. My hope was that in time we would move beyond just being work friends to being "real" friends. It didn't quite work out.

Maybe that sounds needy. Honestly though, at this point in my life, though acquaintances are nice, I have plenty of obligations (that family thing), and if I'm going to take the time to sit down with someone in the morning for a cup of coffee, I'm more interested in investing in an authentic

friendship, not just one built on shared inconveniences.

About six months ago, Tom moved to a different division, work grew busy, we met less often for coffee, and we just kind of fell apart. When I did see him it felt hollow, like going through the motions of a friendship, and so I started finding other things (and other people) to occupy my time. Maybe I should have tried a little harder, put myself out there more, but when there are only so many hours left in a day after work and family have taken their "pound of flesh," you have to be a little selfish with your time.

When I stopped riding the Train, those flaws I had overlooked started to become more apparent. Tom was good at a lot of things but he was lazy and, honestly, it annoyed me. When it came to the less-than-sexy parts of the job training units preparing to deploy, other people consistently had to pick up his slack because he simply refused to do the work. He was opinionated (who isn't?), but not in the sense that encourages conversation. He refused to listen because no one else knew better than him. And, he was shysty, playing little power games and utilizing his personal relationships to push agendas that only benefited him. Plus, when things didn't go his way, he concocted elaborate conspiracies to avoid the reality of his failures. When one of his training events fell apart, instead of reflecting on his utter lack of presence before, during, and after the "shit hit the fan," he blamed the guys in other divisions who were forced to run it in his absence.

The irony of our briefly-lived bromance was that as we moved apart, I became a topic of discussion on the Hate Train. Of course I never heard it myself, but people talk and I found out that my "friend" had gathered around himself his own little cohort of travelers. From what I'm told, they practically lived on the Hate Train. Easy to believe given the palpable toxicity that they exuded when they were together and the general air of superiority they put on when interacting with anyone not on the Train. It's sad, but I have to wonder

if that was me at some point. And that possibility, that I was one of those people, more than anything else is what keeps me from setting up shop on the Train—a brief visit maybe, but no permanent residence.

I don't know if the Hate Train is "good" or "bad." Does the Train get old? Yes. Should we try not to ride? Sure. Still, I know the Train is good for something. I learned a lot while riding the Train: how I react to frustrations and how those frustrations can be a catalyst for change. I learned what kind of leader I wanted to be listening to other people's frustrations. I made it a priority to foster an environment of inclusiveness, where everyone had a say, so long as we kept it civil, about how we wanted to execute training, run the division, or where to get breakfast on short days. Not least of all, I learned that I wanted to surround myself with people who didn't need to resort to riding the Train when frustrated, but who would challenge me about the decisions I'd made and work with me to solve our problems rather than walking away to bitch and moan in secret.

Above all, I learned how long term exposure to the Train is toxic and how when I leave military I don't want my legacy to be that of just another shit talker. It's not in me to not act when I can see the solution. Is it easier to just ride the Train and spew hate at everyone as they struggle? Sure, but does that mean it's "right?"

I don't know if it makes sense to label the Train as "good" or "bad," but the Hate Train is a reality we have to confront because the Train won't stop going, not as long as there are people willing to ride.

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# Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'

*Still Come Home*, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that "insists on the wrongness of her life." Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya's sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can't get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who

was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become “quietly minted Taliban headquarters”—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. (“Afghans have been fighting for all of time,” he reasons. “Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.”) His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz (“the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose”), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—“dancing boy”—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that “his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used.”



Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But

this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

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Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming ("it could be now. Or now. Or now"). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word "impossible": "Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible." When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. "It feels so good," he thinks, "to do something right." By "right," he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

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Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for

that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

“‘When was this cup  
That shows the world's reality  
Handed to you?’”

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*An excerpt of Still Come Home appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it [here](#) and purchase the book [here](#) or [here](#). Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a [recent review](#) of Still Come Home—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.*