

# New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: “Fort Mirror”



Getting posted to Fort Mirror was a death sentence. The most coveted of all postings, soldiers jockeyed for the honor, begged superiors to send them to the fort on patrols or did what they euphemistically called “drug deals” to get assigned to units deploying soon. You went there, you died. Or you

didn't. Some people got hurt. Many of the people who spent time at Fort Mirror came away unharmed. Others went mad.

Officers were the worst. Ambitious young men and women subjected themselves to demanding and physically exhausting trials, hazed themselves brutally just for a chance to deploy to Fort Mirror. Knowledge of which units were headed where was highly sought after. If based on rumor and forward planning at headquarters it looked like there was a 20% chance a particular unit was going to Fort Mirror, that was considered quite good, and the officers lined up to serve. Over time, officers became conniving, wheedling things, strong from their training, ruthless in their networking. Most of them (save for the luckiest who knew somehow they were going to Fort Mirror) lost themselves completely trying to get there.

But Fort Mirror was worth it. That's what everyone said. People knew that at Fort Mirror whatever else happened, the enemy would attack in strength—they'd come in the night, from some direction nobody thought possible. Or they'd come during the day in overwhelming numbers, and it was all hands on deck, fighting from one side of the fort to the other with a box of hand grenades to share on those occasions the enemy attacked at the place defenses were strongest, and still got in, punched their way through, although the base commander had anticipated that very move.

People went to Fort Mirror because catastrophic, once-in-a-decade attacks were bound to happen. Soldiers and officers went there in pairs, with their best friends, each knowing that the other would likely die, and it would be a formative tragedy. Each man secretly believed it would be the other who perished. Sometimes, a man went to Fort Mirror to die, and formed a friendship with a soldier or officer whom they believed would make it through, thereby keeping their memory strong. It actually played out that way a few times. A few times it played out the opposite, with the person who went there to die living, and the person who went there to live

dying unexpectedly.

Those were the glory years for Fort Mirror. Rumors spread from the military to the writers obsessed with military affairs. Journalists began showing up to write stories and record television spots, to film for documentaries. This furthered the fort's fame, spreading its name far and wide among those paying attention. The more that soldiers and officers were recorded or written about at Fort Mirror, the greater the numbers of ambitious young soldiers and officers clamoring to join units going or staying there. To a certain type of man, this notoriety was reassuring, knowing not only that one would perform brave valorous feats, but that afterwards, there was a reliable chance that one might read an article about it in the newspaper, see themselves on television.

For the career minded, Fort Mirror became a rite of passage. Promotion was assured for those who could deploy there and turn it to their advantage. Many junior officers went on to distinguished careers after serving at Fort Mirror, likewise with the sergeants. Medals for bravery were handed out there like pieces of candy at Christmas. Every other year or so, a soldier or officer would earn the highest honor their country had to give.

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The military hierarchy hated Mirror. Its existence repudiated so much of what the war was said to be about in the generals' press releases. It was the grain of truth in the myth of the war, it was the persuasive argument justifying some new barbaric action. Academics wrestled with it as a problem, conceding that its being an outlier to their models spoke to some more essential lesson about conflict. Meanwhile outside of government and the military, few had heard of Fort Mirror—and that's because few had heard of the war, in spite of the journalists writing stories about it, in spite of the television spots and occasional documentaries. Even though

there was no specific awareness of Fort Mirror, it's safe to say that without it, the war as a phenomenon would not have been possible.

Operations at Fort Mirror were sometimes mission driven, but they were never metrics-driven or data-driven. It had not been optimized for search results, there were no subheds partitioning it into sections or dragging readers' eyes from one section to the next. It had no keywords. Its reading level could not be assessed. It was not hyperlinked or back-linked to other pages. Its domain authority score could not be established.

In terms of its layout, Fort Mirror was not exceptional. It consisted of walls, and an entrance, and guard towers, and a dining facility; all the things you'd expect a fort to have. Still, because of the terrain on which it had been built, part of Fort Mirror extended onto a flat plateau—a brooding section that seemed to gaze out at the surrounding countryside like a man lost in thought. There was a second, lower section at the base of the plateau. A trail cut into the stone cliffside centuries before by some farsighted builder or military commander connected the two positions and had been expanded and fortified over the decades. In its whole, Mirror was remarkable, a shining, demented visionary, a Castle Frankenstein or one of Frank Lloyd Wright's lesser-known experiments; a part of its surroundings, and also totally apart from them, impossibly alien.

When the military arrived they stationed artillery and mortars on the plateau, and had a place to land helicopters full of food, mail, and other sundries needed to keep a fort going. Around 300 soldiers lived at the fort at a time though occasionally the number would grow for bigger operations.

The terrain deserves more consideration. Because of its appearance in various print and broadcast media across various seasons, it's possible to get a sense of the place, but in

*spite* of widespread coverage, descriptions of it conflict and can even at certain points as was the case in a feature in *The New York Times* and another in *Der Spiegel*, explicitly contradict each other. In some recollections the plateau on which the fort was founded grew out of a hill within a valley, ringed by foreboding mountains. In others, the plateau jutted out above a deep river that cuts through what appear to be plains, or emerged from buildings in a town or bazaar. It was compared favorably and unfavorably with a decayed New England industrial center, hollowed out by offshoring. Others saw in it the mountains and rivers of Central and Eastern Europe. One thing that everyone agreed on, in describing the milieu in which *Mirror* occurred, was that the weather in the place varied wildly, with sunny calm often replaced with no warning by torrential downpours. Fog, too, often obscured the fort, rendering it vulnerable to attack, but also difficult to detect.

There were several Observation Posts or "OPs" higher in the hills, manned by soldiers and local constables in groups of 8-12, total. The precise number of OPs varied between three and five, depending on the goals of the commanding officer. At first the OPs were named for cardinal directions, but over time, took on the names of soldiers who fell in fighting. One was even named for a heroic local constable who sacrificed himself during a particularly desperate action, unexpectedly saving the lives of eight soldiers. This act of love was seen as something of an exception to an unspoken rule to acknowledge the local residents as little as possible; in general, places were named only for military soldiers or officers, or cultural signifiers or signposts from home. Locals had their own names for things. They even had their own name for the fort, though it was deployed as trivia and assigned no particular importance, save to the occasional soldier or officer who thought taking local matters seriously ameliorated their complicity in the war, or because it reminded them of a spouse or partner.

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The oddest thing about Fort Mirror, and the thing that most people remarked on when they first arrived, was that every inch of the fort was covered in mirrors of the sort one might find on the local economy. The walls were covered with mirrors outside and inside. Instead of windows, there were mirrors, instead of paintings, mirrors, instead of doors, great opaque slabs of reinforced glass, in which one could see one's own reflection and that of one's surroundings. The outside of the fort was draped in mirrors which were affixed by metal wires or placed into stone or wooden fittings designed for the purpose. This was true of the lower and upper portions of the fort, with the exception that the mirrors hung in the lower part of Fort Mirror were in general larger and heavier than those above. Some suggested that this was owing to the difficulty of porting larger mirrors up the cliffside; prior to air travel there was no easy way to bring mirrors up from the surrounding valley to the plateau.

When mirrors were damaged by the fighting, as they often were, they were quickly replaced. Mirrors had been built into and onto the fort long ago—more credulous soldiers said that this was done by special operations during the initial phase of the war, but the special operators who had seized the fort from enemy forces maintained that the mirrors had been there when they arrived. Earlier accounts from militaries of other, older armies, had also described the fort as having been draped in mirrors or “reflective glass,” and hypothesized that it had at one time been the residence of a great king or emperor.

One officer developed a friendship with a popular and well-educated interpreter, “Johnny,” who said that the fort was a place of great religious significance. According to him the fort was on very old ground, perhaps predating monotheism—perhaps, indeed, contributing to it in some obscure way. The local villages all regarded the fort with dread and superstition, and the fort and its occupants played

significant roles in myths of the sort still regularly encountered in distant rural areas even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, the fort factored into local religious stories, which attested to its durability, as myths of a certain power and endurance were always incorporated into orthodoxies rather than destroyed. Every time the enemy attacked, they would leave behind new mirrors to replace the ones they'd damaged. With time, it became a tradition among soldiers as well, with new units bringing new mirrors of all shapes and sizes, and purchasing quantities on the local economy at a significant mark-up.

In the arts, Fort Mirror inspired many essays and fictional stories focusing on its construction and layout, and the effect that living there produced on many soldiers and officers. Journalists helped lead the way by writing about it in public, and always seemed eager to consider its significance in terms of what to them was a unique experience. There was invariably a part in every article or video where the author or narrator would show how little most soldiers and officers cared about living among their own reflections, as well as how odd and disorienting it was to new arrivals. Many soldiers and officers took it upon themselves to understand the significance or consequences of living on Fort Mirror through graphic novels, fiction, memoir, movies, video games, and art.

"I wake up in the morning blinded by the light of thousands of suns, trapped in a funhouse maze of my agonized and distorted, shattered body," wrote one reporter, "while a sergeant walked by me in flip-flops to the showers, totally oblivious, as if this were the most normal thing in the world. A mortar boomed in the distance, and as I dropped to the ground, he reached the bathroom and opened the mirror, then disappeared nonchalantly inside as an explosion burst a few hundred meters to our south..."

It was a strange place. Legends grew up about and around it over the years within the military, though you truly had to have lived it to understand many of them. Some soldiers fell in love with local women, others, with each other; others still, with the idea of escaping Fort Mirror, which while one was posted there was almost impossible. Some went mad sitting in their barracks rooms, at night, flicking a small flashlight on and off, staring at themselves in the mirror-walls, wondering about what they might have done differently during the previous day's patrol, or how they'd perform on the upcoming operation. It was said that one could see the past in the mirrors, dead soldiers from wars long past or from actions just months old. Perhaps those who died within Fort Mirror's walls were doomed to walk within forever. A persistent but idiosyncratic story was that one could see the future in the mirrors, given credence by the many soldiers who experienced professional success in their subsequent civilian lives. Another story concerns a distinctively squat and strong-willed but disliked colonel, who disappeared from the fort, but who was subsequently reported roaming the mirrors of the fort too many times and by too many different sources for it to have been coincidence.

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One might think that there would be some taboo against breaking mirrors while posted to the fort. There is some truth to this, to deliberately destroy a mirror needed some justification. If, for example, one broke a mirror accidentally, firing at a perceived foe, this was permissible. To destroy a mirror in order to "liberate" the image within was also viewed as understandable, though officially it was frowned upon and never encouraged. Breaking mirrors out of an instinctual desire to wreck or destroy was also dissuaded even though soldiers and officers caught doing it were rarely punished. As with all things Mirror, justice bent toward mercy and understanding when it came to acts of violence.

Adjusting the mirrors – changing their orientation or marking them with paint or markers – was something that inspired instinctual revulsion by all, soldier and local alike. Soldiers caught changing the mirrors in any way would be transferred out from the unit after a quick investigation to determine the facts. Locals caught changing the mirrors in any way were never seen again.

Another notable characteristic of the fort was that having struggled so mightily to be posted there, as soon as a soldier or officer would leave, they'd be filled with a burning desire to see the place closed. They justified this desire by explaining that no more people should die or be injured in so pointless and strange a place. Meanwhile, the soldiers and officers who'd yet to deploy to Fort Mirror maintained that this was bitter jealousy, that Fort Mirror veterans wanted to hoard all the glory for themselves; that they only wanted to close the fort so that nobody else could get medals, so they'd be the only ones who were special.

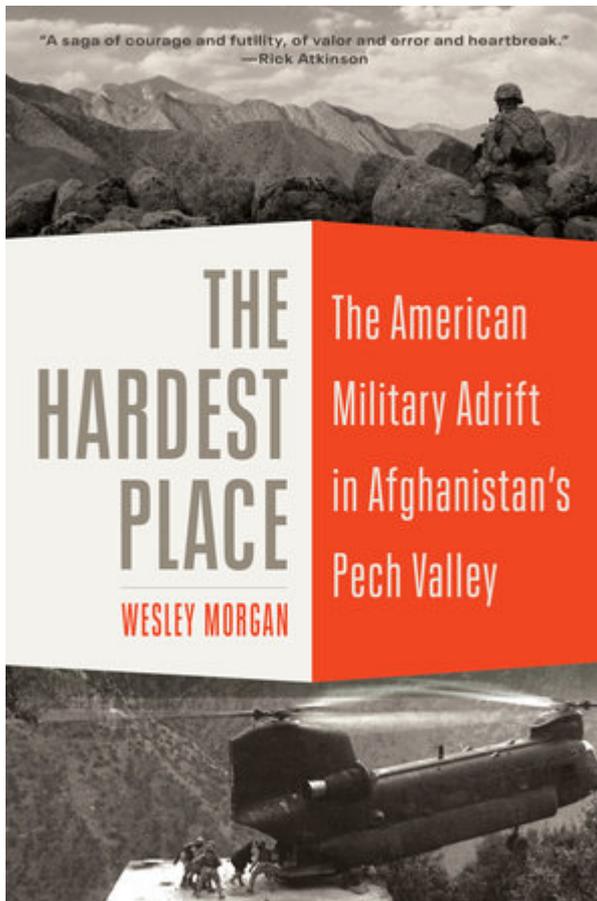
Would the war ever end? Would the soldiers stop flowing into Fort Mirror, fighting desperate battles at night or in the day? Would the junior officers stop competing for posts there, stop gazing into Mirror's walls to regard their square-jawed future political campaigns? Would journalists stop writing nuanced pieces balancing the reality of the war with the idealism of the energies that had brought the military to occupy the fort in the first place? Would the timeless myth, whispered among the oldest locals, ever come to pass: that someday a line of light would appear in the middle of the fort's mirrors and all the mirrors of the world, accompanied by the thunder of countless horses hooves, before the people of the mirror world burst their magical reflective confines to enter our own world? And what would happen if they did?

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# **New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: “‘The Hardest Place’: Wes Morgan’s Post-Mortem on Americans in Afghanistan’s Pech Valley”**

If I were to write a morality tale about America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan—something in line with Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* or John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, I’d make heavy use of allegory. That’s what people did in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, they named monsters for the seven deadly sins, and great heroes and ladies for the seven optimal virtues. So using that principle, I’d probably make a valley in some hard-to-reach location, and place a village of strategic necessity there, and name it Want. And the Americans would fall all over themselves trying to take and hold Want, and they wouldn’t be able to, because Want is, as everyone knows, simply the state of desiring a thing or a state or a person—it can never be fulfilled.

Well, I suppose if this were a true morality tale, the way out of Want would be Faith, or Chastity, depending on the context. That’s how those books were written back in the day.



Wesley Morgan is a journalist. His debut book, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* is not a morality tale, and there's no need for the type of heavy-handed writing or obvious analogies popular a few centuries ago. Morgan simply writes what he sees in interviews, documents, and research, as well as what he observed during reporting trips to the Pech, which he covered as a conflict journalist about a decade ago.

As it turns out, there *is* a valley, and the valley *does* have a village of great importance to the Americans, and the village's name *is* Want (the Americans transliterate its name from an old Soviet map to "Wanat" which could also be styled "why not?") and sure enough, filling the village with soldiers does not satisfy anyone's objectives or ambitions. Want—the place, the village—is a kind of bottomless pit, and, essentially, an allegory for itself.

Everyone, and I mean everyone who deployed to Afghanistan on a

combat mission and observed the purposeless and absurd nature of the war should read this book. There are Americans and Afghans who are thoughtful, and optimistic, and earnestly try to make things better, and Americans and Afghans and other foreigners who are cynical and egotistical and through their busy, careless actions make things exponentially worse. There aren't heroes or villains.

*The Hardest Place* is exhaustively researched, pulling on hundreds of interviews and many more sources and documents to paint a comprehensive portrait of the area—a hard to reach place in the northeast of Afghanistan, on the border of Pakistan. The soldiers and officers who are quoted and described offer vivid portraits of typical American servicemembers presented with a harsh and unusual challenge. Morgan doesn't limit his scope to the American or Afghan side of things—he talks wherever possible with Afghans, and Taliban, and other local residents of the area. It is often during these discussions that some crucial fact or perspective missing to Americans clicks into place, such as the significance of the lumber trade and the various families engaged in that pursuit in the Pech river valley. Morgan's familiar with the Soviet experience of the place, and he relays his own experiences, too, that cannot be fully put into words, but may be described as a mixture of awe and dread.

Reading *The Hardest Place* was hard to do and people with PTSD ought to be warned. One will see one's officer leadership in its pages—one will see one's units—one will see successes and failures, noble and wise visions to improve the place, and naked, disgraceful ambition. Morgan looks at the actions and events plainly, and without judgement. He writes about significant actions and results and the evolving context of the place.

Careful readers will note that there were places and schemas where it seemed like progress was being made, and that progress could be made. Those of us with multiple combat tours

to Afghanistan under our belt know this phenomenon well; one sees or experiences a failure of a deployment where everything becomes worse, and decides to turn things around during a subsequent deployment, to learn from the mistakes of the past. An empathetic battalion commander and a visionary brigade commander make progress in a place for a year or two. Eventually, inevitably, a dumb guy wants to see action, wants to see combat, and jumps in and shoots the place up, and everything goes to hell.

Morgan lays bare a couple of illusions: first, that the good officers or good plans would work without the bad officers and cruel plans, and second, that the military is capable of selecting good officers to do good planning—as often as not, these people seem to leave the military, and the ones who remain are (as often as not) the dumb and cruel ones.

Even those officers who are neither dumb nor cruel, like Stanley McChrystal, come in for criticism. McChrystal's impulse to do something rather than nothing when faced with doubt contributed to unnecessary catastrophes in the Kunar Province of which the Pech is a part. An entire mindset that has begun permeating the corporate world, depending on ideas like "data-driven" and "metrics-driven" and which earlier generations would have described as "results-driven," led to avoidable blunders and worse. Americans, it seems, murdered in the name of progress. This type of behavior and mentality could be seen everywhere in Afghanistan, and plays out here in the United States.

A morality tale might have worked out differently for the people described in *The Hardest Place*. Some veterans of the Pech leave the military, others are promoted to greater levels of responsibility. The U.S. was drawing down from Afghanistan under President Trump; it seems that drawdown has been placed on hold under President Biden. In a morality tale, there would be some clear lesson to be learned. The lesson—that America's business in Afghanistan concluded years ago and that we ought

not to be there today—is present, but Americans seem incapable of learning it.

But *The Hardest Place* isn't a morality tale; its protagonist is not named Christian, and nobody is trudging slowly toward the Celestial City. The book is long-form journalism at its best. Reading about America's sad and doomed involvement in the Pech, one feels that the valley acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting the essence of the people and units that enter. What those units encounter, ultimately, is themselves—bravery under fire, civilian casualties, idealistic dreams of a peaceful Afghanistan, Medals of Honor, victory, defeat. The place eventually resists every attempt to change it, defeats efforts to shift how America's enemies use it. What does that say about American culture? That America actually hoped to succeed, patrolling in a place named Want?

Morgan, Wes. *The Hardest Place* (Random House, 2021).

You can purchase '*The Hardest Place*' [here](#) or anywhere books are sold.

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## **Praying at America's Altar: A Review of Phil Klay's MISSIONARIES, by Adrian Bonenberger**

One of the first books I read was given to me by my father, who got it from his father—a children's version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Opening the tome in the garret that was our home, I'd be transported to the vastness of Homer's Aegean. A

giant tome that has fit awkwardly on my bookshelf since, the book's pages demanded effort and dexterity from my young arms, each revealing some new story or chapter in the war between Greece and Troy, and, later, Odysseus' long and tortured return to Ithaca.

Beautifully illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, the book has a distinctive look that was clearly intended to evoke black-figure and red-figure paintings found on pottery from Greece's Classical period and earlier. Illustrations often take up more than one page, with action swirling from left to right, and back again, a chorus between the characters, achieving an effect on the viewer not unlike that produced when walking around the urns and amphorae that unfurl stories of Achilles, Hector, and clever Odysseus in museums today.



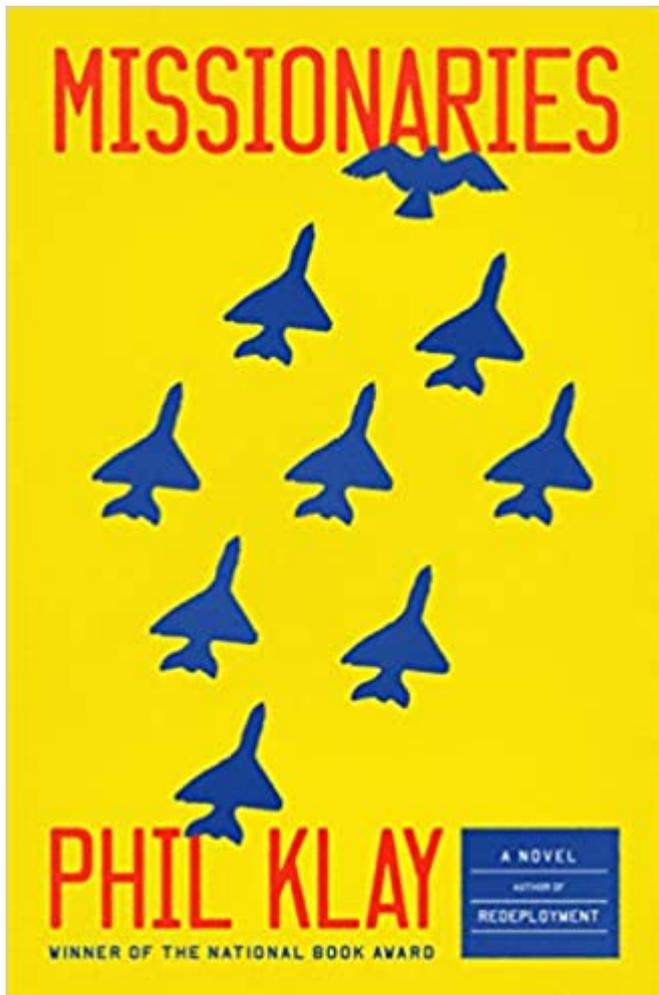


A two-page spread early on in the book introduces the characters together, more or less in context. The pro-Greek gods are arrayed on the left, above the Greek ships, while Greek heroes form a single-file line walking rightward across the page and onto the next, where they encounter the Trojan heroes and other significant Trojan characters in a stylized building. Above that building float the gods who support Troy.

It is a childish device, to introduce all of the characters immediately, and in their context, but this is a children's book. On those two pages, which almost serve as a glossary, I spent much time—either flipping back to cross-reference my understanding of a particular event, or simply to understand who fit in where with which story. With all of the love and care that went into building this book *for children*, it is not surprising that a war or wars that occurred nearly three thousand years ago remain entrenched within cultural memory. Indeed, they have come to form a great part of the literary basis of western civilization, and helped shape my own development.

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Phil Klay's [Missionaries](#) does not introduce its characters all at once, in part because Mr. Klay assumes that his readers are not children who lack object permanence and are capable of holding thoughts in their heads for longer than a minute. Instead, *Missionaries* offers a sophisticated narrative template, the shape of which organizes further chapters, and accomplishes the goal of stitching disparate storylines and characters together. The point of this device is to bind the journey of its characters together thematically—to create a plot driven by ethical choices rather than linear, temporal accident.



In this sense, *Missionaries* occupies a place in western literature most sensible to readers 100 years ago. It is a modernist book: things happen for reasons, and rewards are organized around a central ethical framework. It is a moral book: the bad come to bad ends or are thwarted from achieving their plans, and the good are afforded some measure of satisfaction through their choices.

The first character readers meet is a Colombian child growing up in the rural south. He's devastated by war, a kind of avatar of victimization, losing his parents and home before being rescued from the streets by a Christian missionary. The story moves back and forth between this child's evolution into a criminal during the 1980s and 1990s and the life of a female conflict journalist covering Afghanistan in 2015.

Klay focuses on these two characters' arcs in the book's first section. Later, the story expands to include others—most

significantly a special operations soldier who goes into the intelligence sphere, a former U.S. soldier who becomes a mercenary, a paramilitary leader turned drug lord, and a well-bred Colombian officer from a military family and his wife and daughter.

The final section of *Missionaries*, its denouement, is satisfying in a way that many modernist books are not. Klay avoids the impulse to “get cute” with the story—each of the characters is treated with dignity and respect, even the characters who make bad and selfish choices with their lives, and each one of their endings feels earned. When the journalist is presented with an opportunity to sleep with the mercenary—the two had been in some sort of romantic relationship in the past—what happens between them is both natural and surprising. The Colombian child turned criminal discovers an opportunity to atone for his choices, and how he takes advantage of it is perfectly in keeping with his trajectory.

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*Missionaries* carefully avoids endorsing a particular perspective or world-view, which is refreshing given the contemporary moment—characters are rarely driven by politics, nationalism, or philosophy. Perhaps it can be said that *Missionaries* is not anti-religion. The moments when many characters are at their most empathetic—moments that cannot be discarded later when characters behave selfishly or with cruelty toward others—often involve grace. The hidden hand of God is often seen deflecting or guiding bullets, presenting paths toward redemption, and, ultimately, offering mercy. Not every character takes the redemptive path, not every character accepts the mercy that’s offered. That is part of life, and Klay has represented that sad, tender part of the human experience well. Any adult, looking back over the scope of their lives, will easily find some regretted words or choices, a chance at grace missed. Klay’s characters, too, are beholden

to but not quite fully owned by previous choices to a greater or lesser degree that's magnified as successive generations within a family make choices that accumulate as the years pass.

This is most conspicuously true of the Colombian officer's family. The officer, an ambitious, cultured lieutenant colonel, has himself been affected by the political and military choices of his father, a disgraced general accused of war crimes carried out by soldiers under his command. This is explained as part of the country's fight against the FARC, a far-left communist insurgency group aligned with and inspired partly by Che Guevara. The effects of this longtime war are already known to readers, having been described in the book's first chapter, when the Colombian boy loses his family and village to fighting between the left and right, and the confusing criminal violence that arises in between. By the time the Colombian officer has a daughter of his own, Che has become a popular figure in the capital, a counter-cultural icon, a symbol of South American independence. His daughter has become enamored of a worldview in which the Colombian military is at best a handmaiden of American imperialism, and the FARC a kind of quixotic rebellion against that foreign (to Colombia) influence.

The hard work of the lieutenant colonel's father to do what seems right at the time—to battle the FARC—has become politically embarrassing, a liability during a time when political leaders are attempting to negotiate peace. The lieutenant colonel's own work training special operations to American standards in the war on drugs similarly comes to no spiritually uplifting end. But it is impossible to see what either man could have done differently in their lives.

Klay weaves his characters' arcs together slowly and imperceptibly, or reveals that they have been interwoven all along until all that is left are imperatives to act one way or another, selected out of expediency or faith. Those selected

out of the former tend to elevate characters professionally, while further ensnaring them in some greater, obscure plan—one operated or funded by the United States. Those selected out of the latter receive some sort of completion or absolution, and depart from the story.

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Here is the essence of Klay's project. Using fiction, he has sketched out an investigative piece no less important than the Pulitzer-Prize winning "Panama Papers." The contours of the book outline a series of behaviors and practices that, collectively, both define and circumscribe human action—what might, in previous centuries, have been understood as "fate." The characters inhabit those patterns, unconsciously, living out their lives and loves as best they can. Religion factors into this equation, as does class, ethnicity, sex, nationality, and gender. But the patterns run deeper, and are not accessible to the characters. Envisioned, felt, like some transcendent explanation to which none have access, the truth is exposed only to readers, like a divine boon. The name of that truth is "The United States of America."

Eventually, everything in *Missionaries* returns to the U.S. In mysterious ways, everyone gets drawn into America's orbit of wars and machinations—the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, the various named and unnamed contingency operations sprawling from sea to shining sea. A story that begins in Colombia ends, improbably enough, in an air-conditioned tactical operations center in Yemen. The role of some is to cover the wars, to write about them. Others create the wars, participating in their function as soldiers or officers on one side or another. Others yet fund them, or support them from afar. In this sense every American is a "missionary," and everyone who ends up taking a side, participating in the great global competition for influence, whether by birth or by choice, is a convert. America is its own God, its own religion, at least when it comes to the everyday, the mundane. America is the context in

which violence occurs, America is the bad end of the deal that gets offered to you at gunpoint in some destitute village; America is a romantic liaison in a hotel room with a trusted confidante; America is the family waiting patiently in Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C. America can get you into trouble, but it will get you out of trouble, too, if you suit America's obscure purposes. America is not grace—America is the novel itself, the entire complicated project. This is not political, it's not “anti-American” as some might say; it is, as Klay has presented it, a simple and unarguable fact at the center of everything happening in the world today as we know it.

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My grandfather was a diffident socialist. Largely apolitical, anti-war, having served in WWII, his socialism was the quiet, humanistic sort that started with certain fundamental assumptions and extrapolated from them ways of behaving toward and around others. The only time I recall him being worked up about a particular issue in a political way was to oppose my applying to West Point, threatening to disown me if I attended (who's to say I would have gotten in? I didn't apply).

Reading *Missionaries*, I realized that attending Yale was no different from attending West Point, on a certain level—or Dartmouth, where Klay went, or USC, from which my grandfather graduated thanks to the GI Bill. These places are, essentially, the same, in the way that Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Yemen, Venezuela, China, and America are the same, aspects of a megalithic overarching schema. Socialist, capitalist, communist, religious, atheist, opportunist, everyone inhabits some niche that feeds back into the center. You make choices—attending Yale or West Point or neither—and you live by them. You end up in a war zone, writing about it or fighting in it. Or you pay taxes, run numbers, open a small business, and your tax dollars are spent chasing the traumatized products of war from farmhouse to untenanted

farmhouse. *Missionaries* is about the wars, yes, but because the wars have come to define so much of what is and what we are, whether we like to talk about that or not, *Missionaries* is *us*, it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century Middlemarch, a 21<sup>st</sup> century *Iliad*.

Having spoken with my grandfather at great length while I was in university, and talked with him about his military experiences once I joined the Army, I feel confident that he would have loved this book, and seen in it as much value as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that he gave to my father. I enthusiastically recommend this to my grandfather, although he passed away thirteen years ago—his aesthetics led him to prefer nonfiction, but he would occasionally make exceptions—and I enthusiastically recommend it to anyone who has seen value in culture and civilization, who wants to better understand the world we live in today, and who values human life regardless of the choices that human makes. For although the structure of our world is not pleasant to many, and most of its poorest inhabitants, if there is any hope, it is that people from different backgrounds and cultural contexts can be kind to one another—that the logic of cynicism is not, after all, the only determinative mode of behavior possible on America's earth.

Klay, Phil. *Missionaries* (Penguin, 2020).

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**Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian  
Bonenberger and Andria**

# Williams

**Andria Williams:** Hey there, Adrian.

**Adrian Bonenberger:** Hi, Andria.

**Williams:** So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.



<https://www.abc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article>

**Bonenberger:** Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in *The Joker* is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

**Williams:** I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who

described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

**Bonenberger:** That's amazing, I had no idea... how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison... in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.



Photo, TIFF.  
<https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/>

**Williams:** With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the

film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than once occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?



photo, Warner Bros.  
<https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019>  
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**Bonenberger:** If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid \$18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

**Williams:** His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not

having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild [Vanity Fair](#) interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like “one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they’re rinsing the tar off.” And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it’s bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can’t go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It’s fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog’s teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

**Bonenberger:** Is Arthur Fleck’s struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one’s time? As someone who doesn’t spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I thought Phoenix’s quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it’s worth it.

Like yourself, I’ve always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many “jump-scare” horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt

with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

**Williams:** I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

**Bonenberger:** You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That *The Joker* is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about *The Joker* inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his

entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

**Williams:** I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's

actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

**Bonenberger:** I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no

Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

**Williams:** In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

**Bonenberger:** Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

**Williams:** So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

**Bonenberger:** If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

**Williams:** Who's your favorite DC villain?

**Bonenberger:** At this point, The Joker.

**Williams:** Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathaway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

**Bonenberger:** Yeah, you're cheating there.

**Williams:** I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know...do they?"

**Bonenberger:** That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

**Williams:** I guess there are worse ways to go out.

**Bonenberger:** My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws...he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

**Williams:** That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of

question to  
end on.

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# **The Importance of Identity**