

New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: “American Fapper 2: Still Fappin’”



I know what you're thinking. What could this story possibly be about. Let me catch you up.

First of all, you're wondering whether I shot Angela's kid or Angela. The answer is: I shot neither. I shot a jihadist who spotted me. The next half hour was a blur of sniping, shooting, and explosions. Here's how it ended: me bursting into Angela's room and disarming her. I don't remember many details about what happened to get me there, but I remember quite clearly what happened when I entered her bedroom. She tried to shoot me with her AK, it missed, and I wrenched it out of her hands. She tried to attack me with her fists, and I

held her by her arms.

“Angela, it’s me,” I said, pausing her furious assault, but sparking no recognition in her blue eyes. I removed my helmet like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. “It’s your neighbor, from high school. I’m here to rescue you.”

In fact I had been sent there to kill her, but the plan changed. You’ll be happy to know that I made her my wife, and adopted her kids (we weren’t able to find her jihadist husband, I heard he joined up with ISIS later, after Angela became my girl). Now they’re at Choate, and me and Angela have a couple kids of our own.

Big changes, huh!

This story isn’t about Iraq, though—not the parts from the first story, or the parts from when I went back to do more sniping in Mosul in 2017. It’s not about my happy marriage to Angela either, though that’s somewhat relevant. No, this story is about what happened when, after a long and illustrious career, having just retired, through a strange series of coincidences and serendipitous happenings I found myself in Ukraine, fighting against Russia’s wicked and immoral invasion.

In Ukraine, where I encountered the greatest test of my life—one that nearly ended me, and from which I emerged triumphant only by the barest of margins.

How to set the stage for Ukraine better than to explain that my heroic rescue of Angela from the clutches of evil jihadists wrought in me a profound and lasting change? A change that, given what you already know of my sniping aptitude, probably won’t be all that surprising... that’s right: after marrying Angela, it was no longer necessary for me to jack it before killing some bad guy or another.

Throughout the various places I was deployed with the Navy SEALs and then later Delta, Special Activities Detachment (SAD) and a Task Force that occasionally pulled me up for off the books black ops missions, I did not fap once during a mission. People in those units already knew me as the "American Fapper" owing both to the fame of my story (with which you're likely familiar) and my unimpeachable combat record. But as is so often the case with fame and the things that bring people notoriety I had already moved on... I was no longer "fapping," nor did Angela's prodigious sexual appetite leave me much energy for anything beyond recuperation. I would look forward to two- or three-month deployments as only these were able to give me the time and space to adequately restock the vital energy I needed to do the level of sex Angela required to a standard that I felt was acceptable.

It got to the point where I could barely even remember the person who'd needed to rub one out before achieving the quiet clarity required to make a 900m headshot kill without flinching. Who was he? What odd neuroses consumed him? It was like thinking about a fictional character or trying to recollect the optimism and enthusiasm of a Christmas morning during childhood.

Countless missions later, I'd been promoted and aged out of combat operations. Angela didn't mind and neither did I. Closing in on retirement with two bad knees and a broken down back, the desk job I had once regarded with revulsion and fear came to represent a goal. Nothing pleased me more than to think about quietly retiring to my hometown to teach history or maybe join the police force. As I remembered, and observed during trips back, the sleepy town was ideal for older people to wind down their final days.

The pent up and volcanic energies of my youth, satiated and slacked by the accomplishments of my adulthood, no longer compelled in me a reckless gallop for the unknown. I was admired within my company of peers, and that group was (who

could disagree?) objectively a company of heroes.

This is all to say, nothing artificial pushed me to Ukraine; it was not an escape or a restlessness. The circumstances of my life were pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying. I was perfectly content.

Then Putin invaded.

In 2014 I'd done a training hitch in what Ukrainians call "polygon," the name for a training area, somewhere in its north. It was an off the books rotation, I'd taught a strange crew of old and young men how to do sniper activities. I'd done training missions before all over the Middle East but could honestly say I'd never had a group ingest my lessons so quickly or completely. In fact, one of the older soldiers, a 55-year-old man named Yura who'd been in Afghanistan with the Red Army, taught *me* a couple tricks about concealment that stood me in good stead. That hadn't happened in a long time; I considered him a master sniper and a peer, though his rank was that of a regular sergeant. Their promotion system was a little wacky.

My time in Ukraine gave me a sense that this was a serious people, and I never completely forgot about them, especially as they fought against the Russians over the next years. Occasionally I'd get a note from one of them, inquiring about my health or sending an update after a particularly fierce battle. My training of them seemed to have a profound impact on their development and confidence and I tried to offer them support and conversation as I could.

One of the updates, in 2019, came from Yura's wife; Yura, it seemed, had been seriously wounded in an artillery strike in a town called Avdiivka. She related the details of his injury – the loss of his left (non-shooting) arm – asking for small monetary assistance and I thought, not for the first time and

not for the last time, how different a war like his was. Getting injured or killed by a battery of Russian 300m rocket artillery pieces was never a conceivable end for me. Shot by the Taliban or AQ or ISIS, maybe, but a bomb or rockets? Forget it.

The Ukrainians were in the kind of war I'd only ever imagined or watched on TV. Even the battles for Mosul paled in comparison. I thought about this, and wondered at their ability to keep fighting against the Russians. We wired him \$1000 which his family said was a godsend. Several months after his injury and with the help of a prosthetic, Yura was back in uniform and carrying his trusty Dragonuv rifle.

I thought about that, too.

There had been a foul energy building in the world. A bad moon. Even so, when Russia invaded, I was surprised. I didn't think things like that could happen anymore.

Angela's parents, who admired me (especially her father), were nonetheless owing to their German roots somewhat skeptical of Ukraine, and I would even go so far as to say passively pro-Russian. At least in the sense that they'd totally written off Ukraine once Russian tanks crossed the border.

This prejudice against Ukraine and for Russia was deep-seated with them. Angela's grandfathers had both fought in WWII and I think after Germany's defeat were inclined to view the Russians and Soviets both as horrible and paradoxically also at the same time superior to Germans – the Russians had proved this on the battlefield. To resist or defeat the Russians was seen somehow as impossible, or not worth the cost.

They swore (Angela's father, and her mother supported him in this) that Russia would have the whole of Ukraine in two weeks. I told them as respectfully as I could that the

Ukrainians would fight, knowing the people I trained, and fight they did; bravely, honorably, and against all odds, successfully. The invasion was parried in the north and south, then pushed back. In the east, however, it turned into a brutal shoving match. Mariupol and Melitopol were lost. The war itself darkened.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first weeks of the war the Ruhrs went from seeing things their way, to seeing them my way. I shared photos that Ukrainian friends sent. Then I shared photos that friends of mine, folks who'd retired or gotten out years ago, started taking. They'd gone over to join the International Legion or volunteer. very quickly, some of them stopped coming back, either committed to the fight or dead somewhere.

Those photos and the stories you probably all saw in the media had a dramatic impact on me. Simple and humble men, good people, standing up to what everyone knew was certain death and winning, making death itself uncertain. Defeating the bullet, the red horde, standing up to it chest to chest and stopping it cold.

It got so I couldn't stop thinking about it, and then thinking about going over to do something, to help. I cleared it with Angela, who wasn't thrilled, but who basically understood, and I reached out to Yura, who was serving in the Azov Battalion. He got back the same day. "Come on over," he said on Facebook.

I probably should say a few words about Azov. You read about them in the news and in Russian propaganda where everyone in Azov is supposed to be a Nazi. I can't say how things were in the past; the symbol they use looks like SS lightning bolts, and everyone there (Yura included) just about admitted that the unit was founded as a neo-Nazi paramilitary (funded, somewhat confusingly, by Kolomoisky, a Jewish oligarch) in

2014. But times change. By the time I got to Azov, in March of 2022, it was a top-tier volunteer unit in the national guard, composed of experienced veterans and motivated volunteers. Maybe something analogous to the US Army Rangers. They took their tasks seriously and had obviously trained and prepared for the fight that was unfolding around them in Mariupol. Nobody was “far right” in the sense that Russia or pro-Russians in the west attributed to them. That was all old-guard Azov; people whose influence in the unit was to tell stories about 2014 (and those stories were quickly eclipsed by the actions of 2022 and 2023).

Why didn't I go into the international legion? This is an excellent question. Mostly, I had no sense of what it was as an organization. If the Ukrainians had found a man to lead it, that might have been one thing. Certainly there were individuals – Westerners – who were suitable for the job, and had reputations that might have imprinted discipline and unity on the organization. But these individuals were never recruited – nor, as I understand it, even asked – who's to say whether a Petraeus or McChrystal would have even said “yes” to such an uncertain proposition? In any case, the organization was shrouded in opacity and mystery. As a SEAL, I instinctively mistrusted such an organization...

How did I get to Azov? By helicopter. Things weren't as difficult as they'd get in April, but it was still pretty tight. I flew to Bucharest in Romania, crossed the border, took a car to Odesa, and from there, hopped a series of cars to a point that was still contested across the Dnipro, where two MI-8s were loaded with ammo and personnel. Mine had a Soviet-era camouflage paint job, and flew low, below treetop for much of the journey, until at night we reached the city and our drop-off point.

These flights were extremely risky, though I happened to be lucky; neither of the helicopters on my flight were shot down or even received much harassing fire. In the very early days,

Russian soldiers hadn't learned to shoot at everything, and owing to their local air superiority, they assumed our helicopters (the same model as their own) were Russian, though that changed later. The pilots were, like so many Ukrainians, veterans of many conflicts and much combat. The pilot on my helicopter was, like Yura, a veteran of Afghanistan, and had also been employed as a contractor in Iraq, in 2007. Small world, I thought.

Disembarking from the helicopter, my knees and back groaning after the ride, I helped unload the ammo and equipment quickly, then loaded five casualties aboard— everything was done with great urgency for reasons that would soon become apparent — and two English-speaking soldiers hustled me into a basement as the helicopters took off. The entire operation from landing to liftoff took less than five minutes.

Five minutes after that, artillery came crashing down around us, plastering the courtyard and the surrounding buildings with 152mm shells. It was a storm the likes of which I had never before endured, and it lasted for almost 15 minutes straight. They must have put an entire battery to the task of destroying the helicopters; sadly for them, the Mi-8s were long gone.

This was it, I thought as the dust settled. Real war; the kind I'd always imagined. Not gun battles, the likes of which I and my special operations comrades had touched during the invasion of Iraq, and encountered sporadically since. No—this was authentically and unarguably war, Mars walking up and down streets in BTRs and tanks, swinging his red sword and laughing joyously as it struck business, apartment, car, soldier, and child alike. It was chaos.

For a moment, during the artillery barrage, I had even experienced something I never expected to encounter — concern. Had I made a mistake, coming here? Would I ever leave alive?

Using my American optimism and iron Will, I easily shook off that morbid thought. These were Russians, not supermen. They had advantages in personnel and equipment, but who knew better the price and blind spots of pride better than a Navy SEAL... those vulnerable areas were things I could exploit as easily as shaving errant hairs from my face in the mirror.

The soldiers brought me to Yura that night. I was equipped with a sniper rifle taken from a dead Chechen, one of Khadyrov's henchmen (Azov had ambushed him in broad daylight as he walked down the street with a squad of his soldiers), and given the four magazines of ammo they had for it, totaling 120 rounds. "Make each bullet count and look out for Chechen snipers," Yura said, shaking my hand with his good hand.

"I will," I said, though this was unnecessary.

Yura made a jerking off motion, then winked. "American jerker," he said. "The best."

"Number one," I said. The nickname didn't bother me, and I didn't bother to correct him – it was Fapper, not jerker, or masturbator, both of which I had heard. Getting hung up on that particular always felt like a waste of time, for one thing, and for another, appearing to care about anything usually produced the opposite result from which one hoped, in the military.

I chatted with Yura and his boss, and got a basic sense for the AO. We hammered out a plan for where I could operate, and how to get in touch with Azov if I got cut off (as I planned and hoped to do – one does one's best sniping behind enemy lines). They gave me a manageably light ruck with a couple days of food and water that I would replenish during my forays through the city, warned me again about the threat of Chechen snipers, I grabbed a few hours of sleep, and set out into the early morning before sunup.

Mariupol – what to say about the city. People told me after I returned home that it was a formerly Greek, and this was true up to a point. The city was built on the site of an Ancient Greek colony, but the modern city was a much more recent phenomenon – and attempts to “Hellenize” its identity, similar to attempts to retroactively Hellenize other parts of Ukraine in Crimea and on the Black Sea were inventions by Catherine the Great and other Russian leaders hoping to connect their nation’s history more firmly to posterity.

What I saw in Mariupol was a shattered city; nothing of Greece, or anything beyond pro-Ukrainian spirit among the residents, a desire for peace, and a lot of Russian targets dancing through rubble.

Yura had explained to me how the Russians would attack, and I figured out pretty quickly a solid plan for taking as many of them as I could. First, I’d set up a position adjacent to where I knew there would be a firefight, but offset by 150-200m, preferably with a nice bit of stand-off from streets directly adjacent to the fight. When Russian soldiers popped up, I’d track one, and as soon as the shooting started I’d shoot, my fire masked by a machinegun or tank, then retreat from my wall or apartment or window or rooftop. I’d say my hit rate was around 100%; I can’t say for sure about the wounded / kill rate, body armor or helmets might have cheated my bullets, but as I understood from media coverage afterwards the Russians provided very little field medicine to their soldiers during that stage of the invasion, and even a relatively minor wound could result in a kill. In this fashion I was able to hit about 10 soldiers a day without taking any fire.

For about a week I was able to keep this up, old and battered as my poor body was, and in my head I started to think that I was probably informally closing in on Chris Kyle’s mark. As we were working, though, we were also falling back – always retreating – the noose slowly closing around our neck. It

dawned on me that, American and rather notorious in certain circles as I was, doubly so as a sniper, my odds of surviving captivity were pretty slim – and the means by which they'd dispatch me were almost certain to be unpleasant.

Block by block, house by house we fought, and at some point during that second week, the Russians seemed to figure out that I was there. Maybe a prisoner talked, maybe I had worked enough squads that folks sort of figured out the routine. I suppose it was inevitable. Still, not knowing bothered me; I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong, so I could correct it in the future.

By then I'd shot (again, I want to be careful to caveat that I never stuck around long enough to see the result) nearly 100 Russian soldiers, and going by the killed/wounded ratio my guess is that at least 50 of those had been kills. But I really can't say for sure.

Some of the kills I'd seen – the Chechen fighters Kaderov sent didn't always like to wear helmets for some reason, and I headshotted about a dozen of them – those, I know I killed. There was something familiar and comfortable about those kills; I suppose the targets reminded me of Taliban or ISIS, with their beards, and swaggering overconfidence. I didn't headshot many of the regular Russian soldiers. Most were wearing helmets, and even a lousy steel WWII era helmet can deflect a bullet at the right angle. Russian soldiers I tried to killshot to the gut, I suspect with some effectiveness.

I noticed that *they* had noticed me, or were aware of my presence, when near the end of the second week, squads began scanning windows and rooftops before charging into an area. It could be I suppose that they had encountered snipers in other, different locations – that it had nothing to do with me, personally. But there they were, looking – seeking. And where soldiers look and seek, where they take precautions, one can be sure, there are other snipers lurking – Chechen or Russian.

My numbers fell – I had to change my standard operating procedure. I needed the break, anyway, my body had unlocked new ways of experiencing fatigue and pain. Now I wasn't plinking soldiers or officers – I was in counter-sniper mode. By any reasonable measure my work in this department was exceptional; as soon as I started looking, I found the new or unseasoned or experienced but not battle-tested snipers in their usual spots, and was able to take them out using precisely the same trick that I'd used to shoot soldiers. The snipers I knew that I killed, as everyone was headshotted while they looked for me, or someone like me. One. Two. Six, I tallied them all.

It took me about a week to kill 10 snipers, and by then, I felt a kind of confidence that's difficult to describe. I knew – the way one knows that a table is a table or a tree is a tree – that I was the best sniper in the city; something like a master of the place. Nobody else in the city could do what I was doing. Furthermore, nobody could, now; the opportunity had come and gone, the low hanging fruit was almost all gathered, picked up from the grass with the minimum necessary effort.

The Russians moved in my area only with great caution, perhaps with something bordering on terror. Many people believe that the word terror is synonymous with horror, but this is not the case... horror is a type of extreme fear, whereas terror is spiritual or religious, the state one enters when confronted by the divine. People would peer and creep where before they had run. Snipers were rarely seen at all; more often, what would happen now was tanks or APCs would spray the windows of upper floors whether fire was coming from them or not. Artillery fire and rocket artillery fire was applied liberally on similar logic. The Russians and Chechens had encountered mortality – death, in the form of my steady hand – and they did what they could to destroy instead of fighting the war

incompetently, as they had before. Rather than evolve as an army, they devolved – they were little better than heavily armed gangsters with artillery.

Even under these conditions I was still able to work. I tripled my precautions and began hunting, firing opportunistically and with as little rhyme or reason as I could muster, like a serial killer throwing detectives off his scent. In this way I was also able to replenish my ammunition somewhat, which was down to critical levels. One day I took the uniform from a Russian soldier and infiltrated far into the city, taking a terrible risk (I spoke no Russian or Ukrainian) until I found a headquarters, then crawled in the window of a former bank, walked and lifted myself up a set of stairs, my worn muscles afire with exertion, and (finally) set up in a room across from an emergency exit that fed out onto the roof of an adjacent building. I waited until someone important appeared, canoed him, then made good my escape as the HQ erupted in gunfire and confusion.

This audacious act (one of many) was, though I did not realize it at the time, to create the conditions by which I would encounter my greatest test of all. Jogging along my escape route, all I could think of was the surprised expression on the large, bulldog-faced man – colonel? General? - who had until he met my bullet been under the mistaken impression that he commanded a unit, a group of men, a space in which his authority was absolute.

This very lesson was nearly imparted on me scarcely a day later. Our defensive perimeter was shrinking by the day, collapsing onto the massive Azovstal factory-fortress where Azov regiment and many Ukrainian marines would make a last stand. Almost as soon as Russia invaded again, Azov had begun preparing the factory as a redoubt of last hope, stockpiling food, water, ammunition, and everything necessary to withstand

a siege.

Between the factory and the city was a fetid swamp, which as the ground rose to the north, turned into a ghetto or shantytown. Then, more substantial buildings emerged, and one could say that the city itself began, atop the ridge line. We held that, and about a half a kilometer further.

Ill omens had arrived as the sun rose; a murder of crows had flown overhead as I moved toward my sector, the zipper on my jacket got stuck halfway and I realized I'd need to discard it, and "Yankee sniper go home" had been spray painted overnight on the wall of a prominent building. With a start, I realized that it was the 15th; the Ides of March. When I reached the line of contact to set up a position, struggling to move a table into place quietly, one of the two magazines I had remaining slipped out of its pouch and onto the floor. My pouches were customized for my rifle's magazines, and the narrower Soviet-era magazines used by the Russians and Chechens were an imperfect fit, which drove me crazy.

In this case the accident was serendipitous... the magazine slipped out of the pouch, and as I bent to retrieve it the concrete wall where my head had been an instant earlier sprouted a deep divot.

I'd been fired upon; a sniper – a talented sniper – had me zeroed in. I grabbed my rifle from the table and knocked the table over for concealment, pocketed the magazine, and made my retreat; another two bullets punched through table behind me as I left the room, scrambling on my hands and knees and barely avoiding an ass full of splinters or bullets.

I didn't stop in the hall; I made for the staircase and engaged my evacuation route immediately. Just as I exited the building, it erupted – a tank had begun pummeling any room I could be in. I went through a couple buildings and paused, then moved to the first floor of an abandoned house to take

stock and recuperate, gulping in air like a drowning man, ragged with adrenaline and vitality.

When I checked my gear, I saw that there was a bullet hole in the collar of my uniform's jacket. That's how close it had been. Sheer luck, and I'd made it out alive.

My first rational thought, examining the situation calmly, is that the sniper had been waiting for me. That was the only explanation. They'd set up to catch a sniper, and I was the sniper to catch. So they'd tried to kill me, personally.

It felt personal, anyway.

Three choices confronted me. One: chalk it up to coincidence and go back to work – work that still urgently needed to be done. Or two: go into emergency protocol, and hunt this specific sniper. Three involved telling Yura I was done, but I wasn't ready for that. No, now something needed doing, and a head needed taking.

I'd been tracking snipers and taking them out for nearly a week, but this was different. A high-level sniper – elite, certainly. They'd laid a trap for me, and sheer chance had robbed them of the kill. I had to acknowledge that before anything else. By all rights I should have been dead. God had preserved me for some other purpose, though I had no idea what that purpose could be.

I made a quick survey of the area and calculated what would be necessary to spring my own trap. First I'd need this person to think that I was taking the first course of action. Leaving was leaving – staying was staying. I'd have to gamble that the sniper I was fighting – a Chechen? Had to be – would both feel cheated by fate, and suppose that I was the type of proud person who'd go out for revenge and/or ignore the incident as bad luck. Besides, we had to protect our territory. Just that

day we'd lost an entire block to the Russian forces to our west.

This gave me a day, three streets or so, worth of houses to make my move. I'd have to get as high as I could without going onto a rooftop (where drones could spot me), but not so high that tanks would bring me under fire before I could find the sniper stalking me. I'd have to predict the rate of advance of the Russians, and also predict how the sniper would predict my own movements. There was a lot of guessing involved. I've never played chess, but this felt a lot like it. I felt like both a King. Or a Queen. Or both. You get the point.

Over the next several hours I scoured our territory looking for the perfect place to spring my plan. Nothing seemed adequate – where my room was good, there was no suitable place for an opposing sniper. Where my enemy had excellent fields of fire (like those he'd encountered in Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria, I assumed, trying to get into his head) there was no good place for me to establish my counter-position.

Just as I was ready to give up, I found the position that made perfect sense. It was 1500, and I had plenty of time to prepare a fake position using a mannequin, watching over a likely sniper location *but not* the location an expert would take – this was the bait.

I clothed my doppelgänger with my uniform and rifle – everything needed to be the same – and concealed them. Yura had brought up another sniper rifle (sadly there were more rifles, now, than people to use them), an old M14, one with which I was familiar owing to time spent deploying to assist the Army earlier in my career. As the fighting around us raged I zeroed the rifle and made sure that its optics worked. Actually, it felt great in my hands – brought back memories of a younger me, one who had their entire future ahead of them. A me who never could have imagined that one day I'd end up with Angela.

Yura also handed me a set of thermals, which I'd need to spot the sniper's infil, though not to shoot. I'd make sure the rifle was already in position, so when he showed up that night to take up his position, I'd be ready to pay him back the favor he'd done me.

Wrapping myself in a Mylar poncho, I found my place in a room behind a shot-out window overlooking what had been a rich man's balcony. The overwatch was itself concealed by a large and well-manicured pine bush. It was an improbable location, which made it perfect – the sniper wouldn't, in the darkness, even know that it was there, and if somehow he did notice it, the angle was off from his perspective. I chuckled to myself. Once again, I felt in sync with the world and the city. As it breathed, I did. As I exhaled, it did. Then I waited.

It happened at 0200. The city was quiet – sleeping, mostly, with sporadic gunfire erupting between soldiers and APCs, or artillery booming nearby or in the distance. I felt it before I saw it. The sniper entered the room; tentatively at first – moving delicately and with care – and I recoiled within my thermal-dampening suit reflexively as the sniper scanned my room, presumably with some cheap (but sufficient) Chinese knockoff. He hesitated – something compelled him to look more deeply at my position – and I thought, did I leave a chink of warmth uncovered? Had I walked into a trap of my own? Was this the end of “The American Fapper?”

But then, the sniper continued scanning, until they found my dummy position. I'd placed an electric heater under the mannequin and concealed it, so while visible, barely, it was not conspicuous. When the sniper started setting up to shoot my double, I knew I had them.

Once they were settled on a table, I got ready to end things – no point in extending it, I thought, I'd had plenty of luck on

my side and didn't feel like testing God twice. Just before I lay the thermals down to site in the M14, though, a movement by the sniper startled me. They were undoing their pants and – was it possible? Were they about to do my move *on me*?

A wave of anger rolled over me, but before I had time to process the uncharacteristic emotion, I was struck by another, even greater shock; the sniper, as I could see from the means by which they were satisfying their vile urge, was a woman.

I'd heard of female snipers and knew the Ukrainian military fielded them (I saw none during my time in Mariupol but believe several were stationed there at that time), but for some reason it had never occurred to me that my own foe would be one – that the second greatest sniper in the city was, in fact, a woman. One who had by rights killed me, but for a trick of fate.

The thermal could tell me that much, but I did not know anything else about the target; whether she was old or young, pretty, or plain. One thing was certain: she was observing a version of me that I had placed to entrap her, and had, and was vigorously pleasing herself.

Here I encountered my third shock of the night. I went to leave the thermals, shrouding myself in darkness, to take the shot with the M14, and... I couldn't. Suddenly, I was back in Iraq, paralyzed by an inability to take and therefore make the necessary shot. My target was writhing in ecstasy before me, helpless, and there was nothing I could do.

Should I retreat, I thought? No – I probably wouldn't get another chance like this, certainly not after she realized the ruse. This was it. Do or die. I was trapped, paralyzed. There was nothing to be done.

Unless...

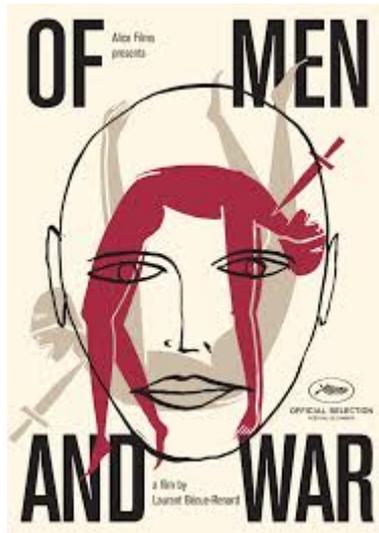
Then I realized. Of course. It had to be this way. I could

explain to Angela later. Or maybe not. Maybe this would never come between us. Maybe, it was this one moment, this last target that the universe was offering me, some kind of redemption for my past, here in a fallen city.

Without touching the rifle, I did my thing, quickly and efficiently. I finished, then slowly felt for the M14's cold wooden buttstock, laying my hands on its worn grains, bringing my cheek to the correct place, lining everything up. A flash in the sniper's window briefly illuminated her in the scope, allowing me to move the crosshairs ever so slightly over her (as I could see it) short-cropped blond hair and yes, attractive face, and placed my last shot as a sniper square between her gray eyes.

The story of how I managed to escape Mariupol before its fall, and Yura and Azov's brave stand alongside Ukrainian marines in the Azovstal fortress are stories known to all, and don't bear repeating. For myself, I'll always look back on those days as the pinnacle of my sniping career. Sometimes you get lucky. I did. Twice!

In Laurent Bécue-Renard's Of Men and War War Is Not Tragic But Embarrassing



In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argued that every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. There is truth to this. Some soldiers do go to war expecting an exciting adventure. Some don't expect to be killed or even think about their chances of being killed. Some don't dwell on the fact that they have guns and will have to shoot the enemy. But most do. Most are rational actors with the same evidence we all have at our disposal: namely, war involves violence. So why are they so often surprised when the war they go to turns out to be, well, violent?

Though concerned with what happens to soldiers after war, the question of imagined experience versus actual experience haunts Laurent Bécue-Renard's powerful documentary *Of Men and War*. Following several veterans at the Pathway Home, a California facility established to help traumatized veterans find meaning in trauma, Bécue-Renard reveals that the men fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan did not find the experience worse than expected, not exactly—they found it more humiliating than expected.

According to the documented counseling sessions, many of the veterans at the Pathway Home participated in firefights, staunched the bleeding of ruptured bodies, and helped collect dead bodies. That they did these things should surprise no one. I would be hard-pressed to imagine anybody who did not

know these things happen when you bring rifles and bombs to a place with a bunch of rifles and bombs. And, not surprisingly, the Pathway veterans tell very few of these traditional wartime stories. Only a few seem particularly upset by the fact that they had to kill an enemy, or lost a battle buddy or even their own combat injuries. This is not to say that these things did not upset them, only that they do not explain why they are at Pathway Home.

The veterans do, though, tell a whole lot of accident stories. One tells the story of how he kicked in a door and broke the neck of a little boy who was about to open the door. One tells about getting a lifelong disability because he jumped from a helicopter five or six feet to the ground and landed wrong. One tells about watching a tanker pull a gun out of the turret and how the tanker blew his own head off. Another tells about leaning into a fridge to get his best friend a Monster energy drink and pulling his M-4 trigger and killing his best friend.

After the release of *American Sniper*, Americans had a national conversation about PTSD (or what passes for a national conversation in America). In the movie version, American Sniper Chris Kyle's decision to kill a child and save American soldiers haunts him. But most soldiers would not be haunted by this. This is a straightforward exchange, a decision that involved conscious volition and a commitment to save fellow soldiers. It is the same logic with which we drone bomb and carpet bomb and drop nuclear bombs on cities—horrible, morally suspect, but (for many) a necessary utilitarian sacrifice that comes with war. Moments like this do not haunt the soldiers at the Pathway Home. In the Pathway Home version, the sniper would have tried shooting the boy and shot an American soldier or shot the wrong boy or failed to make the shot and all the soldiers died. That's what haunts. Accidents haunt.

Kicking in a door and breaking a child's neck cannot be rationalized. The soldier who did this in *Of Men and War*—an

obviously decent and empathetic man—tries to blame it on bad Iraqi parenting. He tries to blame the boy. He tries to blame it on himself. But it can't be explained. It can't be reduced to any schema. It is just stupid and horrible and unfair. The boy is dead and you didn't mean to kill him. That's it. It is a stupid accident. It is humiliating. It sucks. It is impossible to lend meaning to such a moment and such a story because embarrassments like that don't deserve meaning—they resist explication not through their horror but their arbitrary horror.

In "The Chaff," a short story by Brian Van Reet, the narrator describes how what troubles veterans is seldom what most would consider traumatic. Instead, the narrator finds himself overwhelmed in civilian life by a trivial moment, an action and event not especially traumatic. The narrator of Matthew Hefti's novel, *A Hard and Heavy Thing*, obsesses for years over a practical joke involving a pebble—"the stupid, galling, rebarbative, pestilent, abrasive carking rock"—rather than the actual violence the pebble supposedly caused. The opening line of Phil Klay's National Book Award winning *Redeployment*, "We shot dogs," has similar implications. Soldiers go to war to kill humans. Soldiers (and civilians) do not expect to kill dogs. Soldiers remember the dead dogs, not the person of whatever age or gender they had to kill to save friends or because some Captain told them to (the ending of Klay's story suggests the multiple moral ironies inherent in such logic).

From different angles, Van Reet, Hefti, Klay and Bécue-Renard approach the idiosyncratic nature of PTSD—not its horror, not its thousand-yard stare, how war was so much worse than expected, but its very ridiculousness, the awkward and absurd and pathetically embarrassing nature of war. There is nothing dignified about the denizens of Pathway Home. These veterans do not stare into the abyss. They do not see any heart of darkness. They have no access to some existential truth. They

have not returned sadder and wiser men. They are simply lost men stuck on what might not have been, how something as silly as forgetting to un-chamber a round or buckle a seatbelt killed their best friend.

Young men and women do not join the military thinking that it will all be a walk in the park and that war's violence won't affect them. They are not imbeciles. What soldiers do miss is that the violence they will face is often desperately pedestrian, something that could have happened to them back home, which has no meaning other than the fact that it happened. Wrestling with sheer happenstance is not an easy thing to do for civilians. It is even harder to do with several thousand years of war mythology and sentimentalizing telling you that an accident has a larger meaning when it clearly does not. By immersing us in the experience of the men at Pathway Home, Bécue-Renard's provocative documentary wrestles with this disconnect. Let us hope the people who send these young men and women to war start wrestling with it too.

Preparation For The Next Life – What We Want Is Not What We Will Get

☒ After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent

conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

Preparation for the Next Life is not about love – it's a terrifically clever and realistic accounting of the ways in which people seek escape from life at the bottom of a capitalist society. The plot's logic depends in part on offering readers the catharsis of a conventional love story, then switching the terms of the bargain without losing any momentum. By the time readers realize that *Preparation for the Next Life* uses love like toreadors use their capes, it's too late. And instead of salvation, readers encounter a tragic tale of poverty and paucity that leads into a scathing indictment of the choices Western culture has made over at least the last fourteen years. More, if one counts Chinese communism, itself a product of Western culture.

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

The book abounds with stories and myths that the characters

hear, and which they tell each other – they form the novel's life-blood, and are simultaneously vital to the plot and empty of all meaning. The myths that Zhou Lei's mother tells her, for example, serve as touchstones that readers can follow like signposts throughout the narrative. In one, offered in the beginning of the book, Zhou's mother explains that distant mountains conceal a land of plenty. Much later in the book, a tired, hungry, and distressed Zhou finds herself talking with an Uzbek Afghan grocer, who has seen the same mountains from his native country of Afghanistan. The Uzbek offers her food and water, and Zhou experiences momentary relief, which leads nowhere. In another of Zhou's mother's myths, a girl travels to the faraway land of plenty with nothing but seven seeds to sustain her. The girl burns her feet while traveling over an iron desert, but makes it through to a blue river, where she's healed. The occurrence of blue and injured feet later on in the book at various points offer useful guideposts on Zhou's actual journey – or, at least, gives readers a sense of how she views a given situation; in keeping with the book's relentless realism, these signifiers are logical to the narrative and unto themselves, but don't actually deliver any more profound truth.

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The next character readers meet is Brad Skinner, a former bodybuilder who joined the military after 9/11, and served three tours of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Infantry, including during the invasion. His background, delivered in the third person, states that the impulse behind joining was the terrorist attack on the twin towers – but it's more complex than that: *"9/11 was the big reason, but he would have gone anyway, just to do something."*

Skinner is surely one of the more complex veteran characters to emerge in contemporary literature. It would be a mistake to say simply that he is a broken veteran of the Iraq War, or suffers from PTSD – while both are undeniably true in the

context of the text, they simplify and reduce his essential characteristics in a way that diminishes his experiences. The character readers encounter isn't a fundamentally decent man, twisted and misshapen by war – he's a savvy, emotionally manipulative adolescent who has been allowed to hide his defects behind his service, and attempts to do so immediately, as well as throughout the text. Skinner understands the archetype he's playing – the "war hero" – and he cynically exploits expected civilian reactions to this type, again and again, describing himself as a veteran whenever he senses that the listener could be sympathetic to such an introduction. We meet him on the road into New York City, having hitched a ride from a very tolerant trucker after leaving the military – after acting like an entitled jerk and getting kicked out at the first gas station possible, Skinner walks into the city and attempts to pick up one of the first women he meets:

"I just got here, literally like an hour ago. Two hours ago. We could have a drink or something and you could tell me about yourself."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he was exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire

novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: *"They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it."* As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: *"In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the air were being shocked."* He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a

criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next life*, Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea

of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: *"Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles..."* The primary antagonist, on the other hand, *"looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before."* The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary [here](#)), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is

an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

Many people believe that love offers some sort of redemption – a way to balance out the sins of violence, the choices its nation made in war. When Skinner disagrees with Zhou's proposition that love makes the world go round, she challenges him. "*What makes the world go round,*" she says, and Skinner answers: "*War... Actually, I'd say money first. Money and then war.*" America, a capitalist society that seems addicted to both money and war, has made serious mistakes in its pursuit of both – like torture, like bullying, like unnecessary violence, like sexual assault, like disastrously unregulated financial markets, all to no apparent end. And as much as readers would like a classic love story to make it all seem okay, that redemptive narrative isn't here for American society in the way that it seemed accessible or deserved after World War II. In the end, after all the struggles, perhaps the best analogy for this book in the western canon would be one a disillusioned Hemingway wrote after The Great War – *A Farewell to Arms*. The sad truth is, there is no transcendent understanding bought when one covets trauma and violence – only more trauma and more violence – a pessimistic, never ending cycle. *Preparation for the Next Life* delivers both, and in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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American Sniper and the Hero Myth

American Sniper, a new film based on the book of the same name, is being released on Christmas Day. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring and produced by Bradley Cooper, it tells the story of Navy SEAL super-sniper Chris Kyle, widely-praised as the most lethal sniper in American history with at least 160 “official” kills, and apparently many more “unofficial” ones. The film’s catch phrase is “the most lethal sniper in history”, and the trailer shows Bradley Cooper undergoing a moment of moral doubt before (presumably) shooting a child carrying a bomb. The Hollywood studio is banking not only on the film’s popularity, but that Americans will want to spend their Christmas Day watching such morally questionable lethality. The trailer immediately reminds me of another Bradley Cooper role in *The Place Beyond the Pines* (a much better movie than *American Sniper*, by the way), where Cooper’s entire character is built around the fact that he killed a man with a young son the same age as his own and felt guilt and regret for the rest of his life.

Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with “American” something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many, many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America’s adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French Connection*, *The Italian Job*, *The English Patient*, *The African Queen*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Good German*. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is

never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

Moving back to the original story, after 10 years in the military and four tours in Iraq, the real-life Chris Kyle left the Navy in 2009 and started a private security consulting firm in his home state of Texas. One of his priorities was supporting wounded and troubled veterans. When his book was published, he donated the entire \$1.5 million check to charities supporting such veterans. He was a devoted family man as well as a noted gun-lover and hunter (it remains unclear whether he killed more human or non-human animals).

Kyle, along with a friend, was killed in 2013 by a troubled ex-Marine who shot him in the back when Kyle took him for his own brand of "therapy" at a shooting range. The funeral was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas to accommodate the huge number of mourners. This man was a hero to millions of people in America. My purpose is not to disrespect Kyle in any way, but to point out some of my thoughts and observations about the circumstances which lead him to become such a hero to so many.

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to

bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle's death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said "live by the sword, die by the sword". Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord's words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentality of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won't be the last.

Another relevant thing I found out is that Kyle never expressed any regret or doubt over killing people on such a Herculean scale (here is a quote from his book: "It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her."). One must imagine that it would become quite routine after a while to aim, shoot, and repeat. This is no video game, however, nor is it aerial bombing, artillery, or even run-of-the-mill machine-gun fire. Every one of those kills Kyle would have previously and skillfully planned, calculated, and then witnessed in gory detail by means of a powerful telescope sight. That such a thing would be desensitizing is understandable. I would not take such a job, but if it were me I would also by necessity strengthen my personal convictions about my own righteousness if only as a way to avoid insanity (another quote from the book: "My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.").

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle's story. First of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves "silent professionals" when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book

deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle's book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label "war porn", and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

Kyle also had problems telling the truth. Though apparently no stranger to garden-variety barroom brawls, he invented a story about a bar fight in which he punched out former wrestler, actor, and Minnesota governor (and fellow Navy commando) Jesse Ventura. Ventura sued and was eventually awarded over a million dollars in damages. Kyle also apparently made up a story about killing two guys who tried to rob him somewhere in Texas, which never happened in real life. I wonder why he would feel the need to make up superfluous falsehoods when he was already well-supplied with enough martial anecdotes to win admiration from his armed acolytes. It reeks of the braggadocio and machismo that is all-too-common in the special operations communities. He was also a heavy drinker, like many fellow veterans. Alcohol is one of the most common and most readily available means for veterans to cope with the trauma of war and homecoming. Sadly, we should not be surprised by such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for

their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from the book: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there."). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of

thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

Chris Kyle was no super-hero, let alone hero, though many people (and maybe he himself) saw him as one. The world needs neither fake heroes nor mythical super-heroes with super-human powers or super-human killing ability to be able to solve the world's problems or kill all of the bad guys. The society that produced Chris Kyle and his unquestioning world view will sustain itself with tales of heroes like Chris Kyle who defend our "freedom" from the bad guys. The thing about bad guys is that, to them, the other guys are bad guys, and they are fighting for their own version of "freedom". Killing over 200 "bad guys" is just as ineffective a way to peace or freedom as killing two million "bad guys" if there is no reason why and no plan to stop killing them. This false heroism creates more problems than it solves and multiplies the violence in the world. Chris Kyle did not protect or make anyone safer; his story is one small part of immoral (and probably illegal) war that has only increased the vicious cycle of violent retribution that exists in the world. Such a cycle will continue until someone, dare I say one akin to a real "hero", tries to stop the cycle with understanding, dialogue, and diplomacy. The world does not need heroes; it needs human solidarity.