

Learning to Fly: The Army and The Airborne Mafia

Sometimes in life, one experiences a shock or a revelation so powerful that it stays with you for years. For me, one such shock occurred at the Yavoriv training area in Western Ukraine, in June of 2015, embedded with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which was training about 2,000 members of Ukraine's National Guard. The shock was seeing Ukrainian troops (many of whom had been rotated back to training from the front lines) performing at a level of competence equal to *or even exceeding* what I'd seen in U.S. forces during my time as an airborne infantry officer (from 2006-08, with the 173rd).



Adrian and a former colleague from Afghanistan catching up at Yavoriv circa 2015. Photo by Jack Crosbie.

The Ukrainians were unafraid of speed. Going door to door clearing a village of "separatists" they demonstrated a violence of action I hadn't seen in years. These weren't tier 1 units, they weren't Delta or Rangers, they were regular units, albeit those who'd already seen some combat. Their practice runs were filled with the type of urgency and energy every commander hopes for in troops on the offense. For the first time, an assumption I had about Ukraine and Russia – essentially, that Russia would inevitably win – [was challenged](#). Moreover, an assumption I'd had *about American* military formations was challenged. When I tested that assumption of mine, that the U.S. military was there to train the badly equipped, demoralized, hapless Ukrainians, many paratroopers with the 173rd confirmed my suspicion, stating that they'd learned as much from the Ukrainians as they'd taught them. Some paratroopers went further, saying that the

only thing Americans were really good for was as a delivery mechanism for bullets, that this was all the Ukrainians needed.

That was a bit much; Ukrainians I spoke with were deeply grateful for the training provided by the 173rd. More than the bullets, they were also grateful for the process that American paratroopers used to approach training – backward planning, the deliberate design of a program from the end result (outcome) to the beginning inputs. That process, that ability to project out desired results and carefully and methodologically build up to them in a way that took the trainees capabilities and desired end state into account, was not something that was part of most Ukrainians' experience. The extent to which serious and deliberate training had ever been part of the Red Army once upon a time had withered over years of corruption and disuse. The 173rd, for its part, put the lessons it learned from Ukrainians to excellent use, compiling [a remarkable document](#) covered by author and journalist Wesley Morgan in 2017.

There in Yavoriv, watching the Ukrainians train, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade train them, I thought about how suitable it was for my former unit to be offering the training. It occurred to me there that an effective military reflects the culture and society of the country it serves, and also that a culture and society supports a military that reflects its values. There is a kind of virtuous harmony between the two. I also thought then, remembering my own service with the 173rd, how perfectly appropriate the airborne infantry (which prizes decentralized authority for decision-making and mission accomplishment) is for a people who prize democratic values and value as much political and economic authority as possible pushed down to the individual citizen level. Historically, those armies have always punched far above their weight.

Rob Williams, a former paratrooper with the 173rd – who, incidentally, deployed to Afghanistan at the same time that I did (2007-2008) though with the Brigade's 2nd Battalion (I was in its 1st Battalion) – has written an excellent book describing why and how that came to pass. *The Airborne Mafia*, out this March through Cornell University Press, covers the evolution of airborne operations from WWII to the present moment. It also examines how a small group of airborne leaders who emerged from WWII had an outsize effect on the shape and culture of the U.S. Army (and indirectly, on the military) after WWII.



Rob Williams' new book explores how airborne leaders during and after WWII shaped the Army, and the military.

The history isn't simple, but the connective tissue is clear. Astonished by what it saw the Nazi military accomplish in WWII with airborne power, from the Wehrmacht's key (and tactically unimpeachable) deployment during the initial blitzkrieg of Belgium and the low countries to German paratroopers' Pyrrhic seizure of Crete, U.S. war planners became obsessed with fielding their own airborne capabilities. Williams catalogues the development of those forces in training and in war, highlighting key lessons in combat from Salerno to Normandy and beyond. These experiences formed the "seed" of the Airborne mafia.

Over the coming decades, that seed, carried by those leaders who had practiced airborne warfare in WWII (names with whom military aficionados and airborne infantrymen are familiar, including Gavin, Taylor, and Ridgeway) guided and advocated for the evolution of that force within the Army even as they defended it from hostile and competing influences, including (I was surprised to learn) a recalcitrant Air Force that

wanted full control over all air assets but was actively hostile to serving as a ferry for Army combat power it believed technology had rendered obsolete.

Through Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, the key principles of the airborne infantry (radical decentralization of mission control down to the individual soldier level) were emphasized and spread, until the active-duty military became, on a certain fundamental philosophical level, *indistinguishable* from an airborne unit. This was the case when I was in the military on active duty, and as far as I can tell – again, on a fundamental level – is the case today.

Moreover, though he doesn't put too much weight on this assertion (his focus is the airborne), Mr. Williams also makes a credible case for the importance of the airborne and the Airborne Mafia to the birth and growth of special operations. Both formally in terms of capabilities, and also culturally in the infusion of airborne noncommissioned officers into Rangers and Special Forces during Vietnam (the sort of career path described in *Apocalypse Now*), which in turn led to the development of CAG and other elite formations that form the heart of what people think of as America's warrior elite, the airborne was a vehicle that carried special operations forward into the modern era.

The Airborne Mafia is a necessary work. Not only because it's always necessary to lay out important information that's visible with complete clarity in retrospect, but because in describing how the Army came to embody the ideals of the airborne infantry, Williams also offers a compelling defense for the airborne going forward in the 21st century. No force save the Marines has come in for as much criticism as the airborne; no force save the Marines has been faced with extinction as many times. The critics of Marines and the airborne are legion: too expensive, strategically unnecessary, tactically wasteful, worse than useless. But those same

critics rarely (if ever) consider the upside. That upside: that decentralized 21st century warfare is most effectively trained by the airborne, in the airborne, and is most effectively prosecuted *by* leaders who have been raised and trained in that “paratrooper” mentality. Paratroopers embody combined arms warfare as much as they depend on it for survival; they are at the heart of a modern and effective combined arms force just as much as their leaders helped build that force. Without them, that force will crumble; without that combined arms military, the future of the United States becomes uncertain.

I will take it a step further. While Mr. Williams does not say it in the book, I believe the Airborne still has a role in the conventional Army for the 21st century *as the airborne* – that 20,000 or 30,000 paratroopers, descending from the sky by parachute, can ruin an enemy’s defensive plans or blunt or parry an enemy’s dangerous offensive operation. Recent hyper fixation in certain quarters on special operations “Sicario” style strike teams and the usual chorus of voices claiming that technology (drones, missiles, etc.) have changed warfare forever notwithstanding, I believe – I *know* – that so long as the U.S. fields a healthy and capable airborne arm, that the military is in good shape, and reflective of the democratic values and principles our country still – for the moment – holds dear. When we cannot take to the sky to descend at a time and place of our choosing, it will be one more sign that the days of the United States are numbered.

New Review from Brian Castner: Malcolm Gladwell's "The Bomber Mafia"

Why did Malcolm Gladwell write a World War II book? The bombing campaign over Europe and Japan is hardly his typical beat: Cliff-noting TED talks for the MBA crowd. Where's the investment edge here?

It's an obvious question that Gladwell addresses in the opening Author's Note. *The Bomber Mafia* is not so different than his other books, he says, because it is about "obsessives," "my kind of people." The topic is no less than "one of the grandest obsessions of the twentieth century." Join him, for "I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives."

Which I think we can all agree, if nothing else, is a completely bizarre way to open and frame a book about killing millions of people with air strikes.



The Bomber Mafia was my first chance to experience the Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect with Gladwell. You know the phenomenon, if not the name. [Michael Crichton described it this way](#):

"You open the newspaper to an article on some subject you know well. In Murray's case, physics. In mine, show business. You read the article and see the journalist has absolutely no understanding of either the facts or the issues. Often, the article is so wrong it actually presents the story backward—reversing cause and effect. I call these the "wet streets cause rain" stories. Paper's full of them. In any case, you read with exasperation or amusement the multiple errors in a story, and then turn the page to national or

international affairs, and read as if the rest of the newspaper was somehow more accurate about Palestine than the baloney you just read. You turn the page, and forget what you know.”

Turn the page on Gladwell—the self-proclaimed reviser of history, who helps us see and understand the overlooked and misunderstood—and what do you find? It wasn’t until he wandered into my area of expertise that I appreciated the extent of the shallowness, so to speak.

My first encounter with him was *Outliers*, which in classic Gladwell fashion promises to explain sociological events with a surprising counter-intuitive twist. Why are rich New York corporate take-over lawyers Jewish? Why are 40% of professional hockey players born in January? ([They’re not.](#)) The book stuck with me because I had a young son obsessed with hockey; should he just “give up” because he wasn’t born in the right month?

Gladwell calls *Outliers* a how-to guide, but always dissatisfyingly so. I can’t change my son’s birthday. And even if you accept his case for why Jewish people from the Garment District born in the 1930s were destined to become highly successful attorneys, he never explains how the individuals themselves did it. Why one poor boy in the tenement and not his friend? Why one hockey player born in January and not another? One gets the sense that the answer may undermine Gladwell’s thesis and so is left out, or, more conspiratorially, is revealing of other Big Ideas that Gladwell has less interest in exposing, such as the [false meritocracy](#).

I am not a sociologist or a sports psychologist, so I can’t tell you the failures in Gladwell’s arguments in *Outliers*. But as a former Air Force officer, I know a fair bit about the service’s history and culture, and so I was curious what would happen when he took on a subject I knew.

My conclusion is this: Gladwell is right about Air Force pilots being obsessives, but completely wrong about the object of their desire. Which is surprising, because if anyone should be able to understand amoral perfectionists, it's a wanna-be Tech Bro like Gladwell.

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Before I go further, a relevant admission: I tried to write a Gladwell book once. Or, more specifically, I had a book proposal that several editors said would be more successful as a Gladwell book. Meaning, crush the narrative inside a big unifying theme that obliterates nuance but provides more reader satisfaction, that simplifies reality into an easily digestible 220-page pill with a plain white cover. "Gladwell on IEDs" or "Gladwell on Modern War." This was the editorial feedback.

My second book, *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, was this book. The only vestige of the Gladwellian feedback is the biz-speak ubiquitous white cover. Any airport bookstore patron can tell you that a white cover with a single centered object says this is a book with easily digestible ideas.

But the Big Idea in my book—that my friend Matt Schwartz had died because he was targeted by the Taliban individually, just as the United States fights the "War on Terror" by targeting individuals as well—was really always more about personal pain than an objective critique of American SOF policy. My friends died and lost arms and legs and so instead of writing a revisionist counterfactual I wrote about grief and suffering, which are not really business seminar topics. That Matt's death was premeditated murder, and not just random violence, was confusing, and more hurtful somehow. Working with the right editor, I eventually found the unifying theme, but never the hubristic clarity. And without an application for corporate America, my Gladwell cover did not have the effect my publisher's sales department hoped.

Gladwell's Big Idea in *The Bomber Mafia* is that in the 1930s and 40s there was a deeply moral initiative by a small group of pilots at the Army Air Corp's Tactical School in Montgomery, Alabama called the Bomber Mafia. Their secret plan was to "make all that deadly, wasteful, pointless conflict on the ground obsolete" by strategically bombing key pieces of enemy infrastructure, forcing them to surrender. This "dream" is embodied by two men, the flawed true-believer Haywood Hansell, and the hardcore Curtis LeMay who betrays the cause and falls to the "temptation" of winning World War II through the indiscriminate firebombing of Tokyo.

It goes without saying that such a fable ignores plenty, including most of the people in said mafia who worked on the doctrine and were responsible for its conception, implementation, and later revision. For example, Gladwell makes much of the fact that to prove the efficacy of precision air strikes LeMay led an exercise bombing US Navy ships in 1937, while ignoring that Billy Mitchell did the same thing to prove the same point, but sixteen years earlier, in 1921.

But a short book only has room for a few characters, a hero and a villain, plus a few cherry-picked anecdotes disguised as the discovery of something new, the surprise of the "overlooked and misunderstood" papering over the messy reality. *The Bomber Mafia's* small pages, large font, and conversational tone are noted in every review, but it bears repeating: this book should appear on creative writing syllabuses at colleges all over, as a cautionary case study in the major differences between writing for the eye and the ear.

The idea that the strategic bombing campaign of World War II in Europe and the Pacific is overlooked is laughable on its face – few campaigns have been discussed at greater length, or in more detail. Presumably Gladwell has written his book because he believes we misunderstand the campaigns, then, and the misunderstanding is the deeply moral nature of the effort.

Reviews at [The New Republic](#) and [The Baffler](#) have thoroughly discussed the repugnancy of this view. Say what you will about the military necessity of strategic bombing, it should be beyond question that killing millions of civilians as a by-product of that bombing was immoral. Gladwell is not interested in considering how the ends may or may not have justified the means.

Instead of discussing Gladwell's ethical stance, I'd like to address his central conceit: was the Bomber Mafia motivated by morality? Were their intentions pure? Were pilots and leaders animated first and foremost by a shining ethical ideal while planning and executing one of the most harmful events in absolute terms in the history of warfare?

Here, not only does Gladwell misunderstand how events unfolded, he misunderstands the part that speaks to his supposed greatest strength as a journalist: corporate organizational culture. The Air Force, dominated as it is by pilots, has a distinct culture from the other branches. To Gladwell, the precision daylight bombers are early Silicon Valley pioneers, just trying to make the world a better place through scientific advancement.

Whether Gladwell misjudges all Tech Bros, I cannot say. But at least he misunderstands pilots. Precision daylight bombing is not a moral undertaking. It is an amoral obsession with perfection.

Pilot culture is about never making mistakes while operating in extremely complex situations. When a mistake is made, and a plane crashes, investigators will spend hundreds of pages documenting every error and failure. The goal is absolute perfection at all times.

In *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, I wrote about this culture, through the eyes of an F-15C pilot named Evil. He explained to me that being a pilot is about tactical thinking.

"First breaking a problem down into its component variables, and then solving the equation repeatedly as each variable changed second by second: ... air speed, heading, altitude, missiles, gun, radio, radar, wind speed, direction, cloud ceiling, the Cons, restricted airspace, wingman's location, wingman's heading, target, tactics. Double that number to consider the enemy's equivalent of each. Computing and computing and computing every second."

Relentless problem-solving and obsessiveness, according to Evil, permeated everything. "It's why our wives hate us. We are all competitive, and we all try to make everything perfect," he told me.

Missing a target with a bomb is not primarily a moral question, to this culture. It is a mistake. It is inefficient. Unprofessional. Flawed. Culturally, precision daylight bombing was an opportunity for pilots to maximize their equations. A greater chance to be perfect.

In the Cold War, the search for the perfect bombing campaign expanded, from a strategic theory to the entire reason for the Air Force's existence. At its heart, the Air Force's main goal is to fight and win wars all by itself. Small wars are distractions from this purpose. The Air Force exists to win the Big One, all alone.

Being able to win a war solo is still fundamental to the Air Force identity. It's why the Air Force became a separate service, why it so jealously guards its budget and chip-on-its-shoulder heritage. On a basic level, the Air Force believes that everything the Army and Navy might do in Big One will be secondary to the main fight. Evil told me once that he trained his whole professional life for the first hour of fighting over Iran and the first 24 hours over Taiwan, in which he needed to be no less than perfect.

In the decades after World War II, the service worked to

develop the technology to win the perfect campaign. TV-guided weapons, then laser-guided, then GPS-guided, and now automated weapons that synthesize information and guide themselves. As the Cold War turned hot in Vietnam, the leadership of the Bomber Mafia gave way to the Fighter Mafia, as the best pilots and top leaders followed the action. But as fighter pilots took over key leadership posts in the Air Force, the pursuit of perfect precision remained.

And so the Air Force has never really gotten the war it wanted. In the last 80 years, it has come close twice: Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. All military objectives achieved from the air, no messy boots on the ground during the fighting, only for the boring stabilizing afterwards. Not the Big One, but almost a Perfect One.

In the late 1990s, when I was studying to become an Air Force officer, I read serious articles in academic publications, like *Airpower Journal*, that predicted the end of ground combat had arrived. Airpower had finally lived up to its potential, specifically when led by the Air Force, which allowed the Navy a few sorties as a goodwill gesture. As late as the Winter 2001 issue, the last pre-9/11 edition, authors were still writing articles with titles like "[Airpower versus a Fielded Army: A Construct for Air Operations in the Twenty-First Century](#)," about strategies for the Air Force to defeat enemy ground forces singlehandedly. There is a certain wistful tone. Yes, the Air Force existed to strategically crush the enemy's overall will to fight, but they could tactically destroy soldiers too as required. Air Force weapons were so precise, the scalpel so sharp, they could slice off fingers individually as well as carve out the heart, just tell them where to start cutting.

That the enemy would put their hands in their pockets, or hold hands with children, never seems to occur to the grand strategists; this is a perfectionist pursuit, not a moral one.

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Gladwell provides no primary source evidence that the Bomber Mafia generals themselves saw precision bombing as a moral undertaking. Instead, he provides quotes from two modern historians, Stephen McFarland and Tammi Biddle, as proof of this belief. (There is no bibliography, and according to the notes the book is based on interviews with eleven people.)

And yet the evidence that the Bomber Mafia were obsessed with perfection rather than morality is to be found in the book itself. LeMay, a dyed-in-the-wool member of the mafia, eventually dismisses the strategic bombing plan as nothing but late-night grad school discussion, calling it "trying to find something to win the war the easy way, and there ain't no such animal." LeMay was cold-blooded in balancing aircrews lost versus bombs on target. He counts percentages of cities destroyed, as later generals would do body counts in Vietnam and "AFRICOM assesses four terrorists killed" press releases about drone strikes today. When he talks through the details of his tactics, how they kept trying different methods, practicing take-offs in the fog, changing formations so all his pilots flew in straight over the target (even Robert McNamara later called him "brutal" for doing it), Gladwell sees a moral stalwart rather than someone focused on continuous improvement. Later, Gladwell quotes Conrad Crane, the former director of the US Army Military History Institute, who calls LeMay "the Air Force's ultimate problem solver." But also, "he was one of those guys that, if you gave him a problem to fix, you didn't ask a whole lot of questions how he was going to fix it." Correct, and also hardly someone engaged on an ethical crusade. It is someone doing the best he can with the tools he has.

The American general Ira Eaker, in selling his bombing plan to Churchill, says that if the British bomb at night and the Americans by day then "bombing them thus around the clock will give the devils no rest." Biddle tells Gladwell that it is

“very odd” that Arthur “Bomber” Harris of the Royal Air Force (who bombed at night) and Eaker would become such good friends. But it’s only odd if you think the Bomber Mafia was about signalling virtuous behavior rather than achieving success.

If Gladwell had chosen other quotes by those characters, the case is even stronger. Yes, LeMay is famous for saying he would bomb his enemies back to the Stone Age. But even that same Ira Eaker, [briefing President Truman in June 1945](#), about the upcoming invasion of Japan, said that he agreed with General George C. Marshall that “It is a grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war.”

The ugly truth is that LeMay was not “tempted” to do a bad thing, in the firebombing of Japan. Neither temptation nor salvation were on the table. Rather, the perfectionist simply saw firebombing as the best amoral option, the best solution to the problem. LeMay isn’t cruel, he’s indifferent. And ultimately, the Air Force continued LeMay’s problem solving mindset to fix, ironically, the process he had derided as “the easy way.” As the technology has gotten better, “the easy way” has remained the goal.

Gladwell writes as if the way history happened is the only way it could ever have been. That any attempt to imagine another historical path is to misunderstand an inevitability that only he can explain. By providing the counter-intuitive “revisionist” version of this history, he aspires to sound doubly convincing. My new explanation is air-tight, he implies confidently. A Calvinist dressed up in a pedantic sociologist’s clothes.

Jewish people in the Garment District were destined to run law firms and LeMay would inevitably fall to temptation. Hansell was too pure to succeed, LeMay too gruff to stay true.

Couching the bombing campaign in terms of a tragic character

flaw, rather than a choice, makes Gladwell's offhand descriptions of the firebombing itself more grotesque. Nothing more than the cast-off by-product of one of his obsessives. It's jarring and incongruous. Is this truly a moral issue, or just a bad business decision, as he would cover in his other books? Gladwell engages with the actual horror of war as he would a quarterly loss report, and yet even manages to praise the actions in the end. Japan surrendered and gave LeMay a medal in 1964. Maybe it wasn't lost profit after all? Maybe the firebombing was an investment that paid off.

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Gladwell ends the book with a chatty roundtable of current Air Force generals at the Chief of Staff's elegant home on Fort Myer, Virginia. From the quotes provided, the journalist Gladwell was seemingly asking such hard-hitting questions as "Tell me again how great airpower is," a continuing of his tendency to go to the leaders of organizations to find out what it's like to be a peon.

After listening to the generals brag about the precision of today's weapon systems, Gladwell concludes "Curtis LeMay won the battle. Haywood Hansell won the war."

Which is more than simply confusing and factually incorrect. It also presumes that Hansell didn't just "win" the ideological battle within the Air Force, but that he was objectively correct as well.

Air strikes are regularly cited as a swiss army knife solution to seemingly every international problem, from Yemen to Afghanistan to Ukraine. Last July, during anti-government protests in Cuba, [Miami's mayor floated the idea of bombing the country](#).

Which is why it is noteworthy that Gladwell never asks this basic question: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing works? He cites no cases, either positively from

Kosovo or negatively from, well, anywhere else. A la *Outliers* and the illusions of the meritocracy, this is perhaps not the kind of question Gladwell tends to ask of his obsessives.

So let's instead ask a similar question on the book's own terms: what is the evidence that strategic precision bombing is more moral? Or that it simply kills fewer civilians?

[Azmat Khan's reporting in the New York Times](#) has put to bed the lie that the American-touted bombing campaigns spared civilian lives. Rather, officials denied civilian casualties, or failed to investigate, to ignore the true cost. Khan reported that one American official broke down when he realized that though the US had seemingly taken great pains in precision attacks in Raqqa, and the Russians had no such precautions in Aleppo, in the end both Syrian cities were utterly destroyed.

"Eventually I stopped saying that this was the most precise bombing campaign in the history of warfare," the official said to the *New York Times*. "So what? It doesn't matter that this was the most precise bombing campaign and the city looks like this."

The Russians purposely target hospitals and chicken farms, the Americans accidentally hit them; either way, the results are the same.

And is it not results, measured quarterly, that are most important to Gladwell's MBA readers?

In many ways, contemporary Russian attacks in Syria and Ukraine are closer to what the American World War II generals actually wanted in their bombing campaigns: both precision and impunity. The ability to target a hospital, hit it precisely, and get away with it. Modern American generals enjoy immunity in other areas. Drones strikes, on average, [kill ten times more civilians than attacks by manned aircraft](#), and yet have a reputation for precision and cleanliness, and thus largely,

[until recently](#), get a pass by the general public.

Are precision strikes a moral way to win war? Not yet. Strategic bombing campaigns remain bloody, messy, often ineffective, and still of arguable necessity. This ambiguity is difficult for even experts to handle, and Gladwell's entire *raison d'être* is not to write as an expert but as an amalgamator of expertise. *The Bomber Mafia* isn't an honest or earnest look at what experts have written and thought about America's air campaigns during WWII. In the end, the book's central flaw resides at the core of Gladwell's supposed greatest strength. The Gell-Mann Amnesia Effect predicts sociologists and sports psychologists would say the same for his other books.

New Review from M.C. Armstrong: Diane Lefer's 'Out of Place'

I can't stop thinking about Dawit Tesfaye, an FBI agent in Diane Lefer's excellent new novel, *Out of Place*. Shortly after 9/11 and the launch of the Global War on Terror, Tesfaye, along with his partner, Daniel Chen, are sent by the Bureau to investigate a laboratory in the Mojave called the Desert Haven Institute. Like many of the scientists he interviews at DHI, Tesfaye does not quite fit into the simple monolithic identity categories that suddenly demarcate the cultural landscape of what many now have taken to calling The Forever War. Like Dr. Emine Albaz, a Turkish Jew who "abused her security clearance regarding US nuclear technology" and just happened to be married to a "jihadi captured on the Afghan-Pakistan border,"

Tesfaye challenges the reader to care about someone who is not white or a young adult. More than this, and unlike Albaz, Tesfaye is not a suspect in the War on Terror but is instead part of a new movement within the national security state that simultaneously employs diversity while deploying these diverse forces all over the planet to snuff out a predominantly non-white bogeyman. *Out of Place* may well be the most profound fictional meditation I've encountered on the emerging phenomenon some call "intersectional imperialism."



One of the great pleasures in *Out of Place* is traveling all over the world with Lefer's characters and savoring granular renderings of Iran, India, Mexico, and that cosmopolitan state where so many countries converge: California. *Out of Place*, far from a narrow treatise on race and terror, is also a thoughtful story about science and cosmopolitanism and people like Albaz who actually think about concepts like cosmopolitanism: "Careful now," the scientist says to herself. "[S]he was not a rootless cosmopolitan—that old slur against Jews. She was a cosmopolitan who loved her roots." Lefer, reminiscent of authors like Don DeLillo and Michel Houellebecq, affords her characters a fully imagined adult life, replete with interests in science, politics, music, philosophy and sex. One is tempted to describe *Out of Place* as a novel of ideas.

And perhaps it is, but that descriptor, like "cosmopolitan," often comes with a burden, the suggestion that in novels of ideas character does not count and place is a chore. Although Lefer's cast is large and her concern with caste sometimes trumps her fidelity to scene, I was moved by her empathy and dazzled by her ability to web together so many languages and voices, including those of scientists, musicians, programmers, and Zoroastrians. *Out of Place* is a novel that aims for both the heart and mind and I admire that ambition. But, to mix

metaphors, it is walking in the shoes of Tesfaye, just after the attacks of 9/11, where I most powerfully feel the arrow of Lefer's compass.

Tesfaye is mixed. "He'd been born, he'd believed for years in what was now Eritrea, but it hadn't been a country then, and later he learned he'd been born in a refugee camp and there were so many stories, so many lies, he wasn't sure over which border, if any, or where." When I was traveling through Iraq as a journalist in 2008, I remember encountering a noteworthy number of Eritrean guards posted at the dangerous outskirts of "coalition" bases. Was this a coincidence, all of these black bodies guarding these predominantly white compounds? This is intersectional imperialism, the weaponization of identity politics by the foreign policy establishment, a term first defined by Alex Rubinstein. Connected to "seculo feminism," "rainbow capitalism," "woke imperialism" and the Intelligence Community's recent "digital facelift," intersectional imperialism is a term that is increasingly used in new media environments to caustically describe the contemporary Democratic Party and its strategic use of figures like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Pete Buttigieg to maintain an imperialist status quo. But as Lefer's return to the attacks of 9/11 reminds readers, this all began a long time ago. It was Cheney and Bush that sent Colin Powell to the United Nations to argue for the invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, as America's dominant political parties evolved their cynical use of diversity to combat the crisis of democracy, working-class immigrants like Tesfaye were forced, every day, to choose a line of work in an increasingly globalized national economy. So how does the reader feel when Tesfaye does the bidding of a police organization whose home office still bears the name of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who sent the hit down on civil rights leaders like Fred Hampton?

Perhaps more than a bit torn.

Perhaps, like all of us, Tesfaye is not simply one thing.

Lefer constantly challenges the reader's readiness to impose monoliths, binaries, and judgments. Maria del Rosario Saavedra Castillo, one of the DHI scientists, in a conversation with a cartel boss named "El Chato" (who seems interested in repurposing Maria's research on parasites), describes how snakes can sometimes serve as a "paratenic host. Paratenic means being the intermediary in the life-cycle." Not only did I feel my vocabulary expand as I made my way through Lefer's book, but I also experienced a growing sense of awe at the symbolic unity she had achieved through all of these characters and the eleven government "files" she uses to structure her story. In many ways, Castillo, Chen, Albaz, Tesfaye, and all of the other figures who orbit around DHI are paratenic, particularly when it comes to the ways in which they are used by their host institutions and the people all around them.

In light of America's recent withdrawal from Afghanistan and the conversations about LGBTQ+ rights that emerged during the exodus, Lefer's novel seems timely. This is a book about the people who do not fit into the dominant narrative of The Forever War. A striking number of Lefer's characters are single or alienated from their spouses. The DHI, with its intersection of science and desert, seems to attract this lonely and roaming profile, the descendant spirit of nomads, bedouins, and pioneers. But Tesfaye is a noteworthy exception. His story is bound not just to the FBI, with its secure funding (in contrast to DHI), but also to a fellow Eritrean refugee named Gladys. "Glad," Tesfaye's wife, as her name suggests, is grateful to be in America, away from the country that was not exactly a country, the place where, as a child she had received a clitorectomy from a number of men who used "a broken bottle" for the task. Her husband "couldn't bring himself to enter her where she was scarred. They held each other at night. He caressed her with hands and lips and tongue, seeking anywhere on her body where she might feel pleasure." Even here, in the American home, far from the maps

and territories of war, Lefer's character struggle, mindful, like their author, that the body is a country of its own.

Out of Place will be published September 13th, 2021 and is available [here](#) or wherever books are sold.

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 16th and 17th 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 21st century Middlemarch, a 21st 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).

A Review of Ruffi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Ruffi Thorpe's first novel, [*The Girls from Corona del Mar*](#) (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Ruffi

Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include [Dear Fang, With Love](#) (2016) and [The Knockout Queen](#) (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smearred fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

*

In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen*, our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running

and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, “an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort...who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him.” Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

*

Across her three novels, Ruffi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son.

Michael observes that she has a personality “almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion.”

Still. Still. It’s California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I’ve read that Thorpe’s novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there’s also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that’s capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you’d have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.



Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can’t believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. “On either side, my aunt’s house was flanked by mansions,” Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor’s face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post-Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

"As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years," he later thinks, "Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman."

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael's eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a "nymphet," but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael's voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and "performing prettiness" in the same breath as "extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine" and "fuck." Her mention of that "heterosexual male author" with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny's dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It's equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov's middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend's life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in

and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

“Thank you for showing these to me,” I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny’s mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered “suicide.” Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There’s a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, “in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess”). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home’s pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the

outside.

There are real problems in this paradisaical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—so grave, so concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can "deconstruct" femininity, which still eludes her

even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul's Drag Race was the concept of "realness." They would say, "Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now," and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that's maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn't just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is "realness," then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe's chosen locale, to "[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice." Ray laughs to Michael, "No one was born in

North Shore!” There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn’t that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann’s slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying “embrace the suck,” and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann’s husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael’s dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe’s second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family’s Holocaust-razed past and his daughter’s newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter’s hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not

knowing what to say.

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. “You don’t have to be good,” Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn’t have to be socially acceptable, she doesn’t have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Ruffi. [The Knockout Queen](#). A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen is [now available](#) anywhere books are sold.

Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz’s Novel, ‘Still Come Home’

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

candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

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

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become "quietly minted Taliban headquarters"—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. ("Afghans have been fighting for all of time," he reasons. "Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.") His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz ("the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose"), but his past could serve as a grave for even the

strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—"dancing boy"—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that "his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used."



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

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

*

Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel

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

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

*

Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them.

Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

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

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

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

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

wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

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

*

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

Book Review by Eric Chandler: IT’S MY COUNTRY, TOO



This happened in the 1980’s. Maybe it was after I joined the military or before, when I was thinking about it. In either case, I was sitting in a cabin in New Gloucester, Maine with my Aunt Helen and my cousin, Kim. Somehow, we got into the topic of women in combat. I made some comment that we needed to decide if that’s really what we wanted as a country. My cousin and my aunt both snorted.

I don’t remember the exact words, but my Aunt Helen said something like, “Who the hell is ‘we’?”

It sticks out in my memory like I got slapped. Even as a self-centered, male teenager, I had to admit they had a point.

I'm still trying to remove myself from the center of the universe and imagine what life is like from someone else's perspective. I read a book during Women's History Month called [*It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan*](#) (Potomac Books, 2017). It's filled with stories that address a question my aunt might have asked, "Why should it be so difficult for a woman to serve her country?"

I served alongside women in uniform from 1985 to 2013. In peacetime and in combat. Officers and enlisted. Pilots and ground personnel. Active Duty and Air National Guard. I went to the Air Force Academy not long after women were first admitted there. When I first joined the Air Force, women weren't allowed to fly fighters. I eventually served in units where women were flying in formations with me. I'm married to a retired Air Force veteran and Air Force Academy graduate. Her older sister, also a grad, retired as a major general in the Air Force. I should already have a first-hand appreciation for what strides women have made and the challenges they've faced in military service. But Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow, the editors of this book, gave me a new perspective on where my three decades fit into the larger scheme of things.

It was a new perspective that I needed, for a couple of reasons. For one, my wife had a positive experience in military service. She's tough, but quiet. When I push her on the topic, to find some hidden story of struggle or discrimination or mistreatment, she has almost nothing bad to say. Frankly, she seems like an exception. Secondly, I served in the US Air Force. My perspective is limited to my branch of service.

In *It's My Country Too*, there are stories about women in all the branches of military service, even disguised as men so they could fight. There's even a story about a woman who served in the US Lighthouse Service. The breadth and depth of the stories the editors included is remarkable. There are

uplifting stories and ones that are ugly. Another thing that makes these stories compelling is that they are first-person accounts. There's a lot of background provided by the editors, but the stories come from the women themselves. This is a great accomplishment, because, as it says in the book regarding Korean War nurses (but the sentiment is true for women's stories in general), "None published memoirs."

The editors mention Louisa May Alcott who wrote *Hospital Sketches* about her time as a civil war nurse. She served under a woman at the Union Hotel Hospital named [Hannah Chandler Ropes](#), my relative. Ropes is buried in the town where my parents live in Maine, the same town where my aunt schooled me about what "we" means. Her writings were published in [Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes](#) (The University of Tennessee Press, 1980) edited by John R. Brumgardt. Bell and Crow inspired me to pull this book down off my shelf for another look. I was disappointed to see that my copy, that I read years ago, didn't have a single dog-eared page. Say what you will about desecrating physical books, but mangled pages are how I leave breadcrumbs. I read it again.

Ropes served as a volunteer nurse in that hospital in Georgetown. She showed up there on June 25, 1862, the day that the Battle of the Seven Days started. Her nephew Charles Peleg Chandler died fighting at Glendale during that battle on June 30, 1862, the same week she arrived. In a July letter, she says she's worried about both Charles P. and Charles Lyon Chandler, his cousin. I've been researching Charles P. and Charles L. Discovering that their aunt wrote a letter wondering whether her nephews were okay was like getting an electric shock. I have Bell and Crow to thank for helping me learn what I should've known already. In a strange convergence, it was Charles P. who inadvertently motivated Ropes to become a nurse when, two years before, he sent her a book about nursing written by Florence Nightingale. Sadly, Ropes and her two nephews would never see the end of the war.

At one point as the head matron of the hospital, Ropes was so horrified at the mistreatment of the enlisted men who were patients, she complained to the head surgeon. Getting nowhere, she went in person directly to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Once Stanton verified what my relative said was true, he threw both the head steward and the head surgeon into prison. Things improved at the hospital. I was a squadron commander once, so it stings a little to read how she went around the chain of command. But she cared more about the treatment of the patients than how she was perceived. She was also a single mother after being abandoned by her husband in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Kansas as part of the freesoil, anti-slavery movement to help make it a free state, but that's another story. The point is that she was well past being bashful or "proper."

The very last thing that Ropes wrote was a letter to her daughter on Jan 11, 1863 where she let her know that she was ill along with many of the nurses she supervised. She said "Miss Alcott" was "under orders from me not to leave her room." Both of them had typhoid pneumonia. Hannah Ropes died on January 20, 1863 at the age of 54. My son and I ran by her headstone the last time we were in Maine. Louisa May Alcott pulled through and wrote *Little Women*. Funny how lives circle around and intersect in the past and the present.

Two stories struck me in *It's My Country Too* because they seemed universal to me, regardless of the sex of the author. One was the moving piece by Lori Imsdahl. Maybe it was because it dealt with Afghanistan, where I've looked down on scenes like this from the air and yearned to know what it was like on the ground. Or maybe it was because she talks about luck. Or maybe it was simply because I was transported there by her outstanding writing.

I'm a pilot, so another passage that hit me hard was by Cornelia Fort, who dodged enemy aircraft in her plane as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (another incredible story). But

this next bit was universal for a pilot, whether you're a man or a woman:

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

When I read this passage by Fort and the story by Imsdahl, I don't feel like a man or a woman. I feel like a human being.

Which reminds me of something Hannah Ropes wrote on December 26, 1862. Her hospital was overflowing with injured soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The dead and the dying and the amputated limbs. She wrote: "The cause is not of either North or South—it is the cause of, and the special work of the nineteenth century, to take the race up into broader vantage ground and on to broader freedom."

Is she talking about emancipation? She was a vocal abolitionist. Is she talking about the advancement of women? Her writings are clearly feminist. I read all around the quote in that letter and in the book to try to understand what she meant. The editor Brumgardt infers that she means the whole human race. I hope all of those meanings can be true simultaneously.

It's My Country Too brought me to broader vantage ground and helped me face my aunt's question: Who the hell is "we"?

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan's 'The Sport of Kings'

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning \$105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.




1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp

comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.



Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship. 

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual “nicks,” foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: “Do more than just hope for the best.”)

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape “these crazy people”—if it's not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He's the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy (“known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck”) and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches' focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders' whom Allmon will encounter later (““How big was your dad?” “Six-two.” “Good....I want you big, fast, and I want you mean”).

But Marie's chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for

selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie’s body, the “gendered necropolitics” of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the [sequelae](#). “Make me an animal,” Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, “so I won’t know anything. Make me a man, so I won’t give a damn about anyone.”

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.



The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there’s that wink at history again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man’s—most unstoppable force.

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C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon’s mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with

lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "[My Friend, Nothing is in Vain](#)," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity....So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The

Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead*. He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"

A woman cried out, "He rose!"

"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"

"Tell me!"

"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'...Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill..."

...Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"

—

The Sport of Kings is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a *Secretariat*, a *Hellmouth*, pounding for the finish.

—

And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he’d been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he

was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.

Bryan Hurt: The Next Ambassador to France



Bryan Hurt, Author of
Everyone Wants to Be
Ambassador to France. Image
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In a literary culture full of "[McPoems](#)" and [hand-wringing](#) over the homogenization of literature because of a supposed surplus of MFA programs, Bryan Hurt breaks the mold. He's as educated as any creative writer out there, having studied under such luminaries as T.C. Boyle and Aimee Bender in the University of Southern California's [PhD program](#) in Creative Writing. He has also done his fair share of instructing in the MFA world.

Despite—or perhaps because of—Hurt’s background in formal creative writing programs, his stories are utterly unique. The stories in [Everyone Wants to be Ambassador to France](#) hold all the quirk and hopeful humanity of George Saunders’s best work while somehow capturing the inner sadness of works by Raymond Carver, who is no stranger to young MFA students learning the form. Except in Bryan Hurt’s narrative in which a sad and lonely man puts all his belongings on the lawn priced to sell, no one dances on that lawn for the man; instead they beat him up. Even in light of the comparisons and allusions, Hurt’s stories are uniquely his own. I’m certainly not the only one who thinks so, as Hurt’s collection was awarded the [Starcherone](#) Prize for Innovative Fiction.

Hurt refuses to shy away from impactful and relevant issues, but he does it with humor, aplomb, and no small amount of grace. Take the story “[Contract](#).” The story’s form takes that of an actual legal contract with all its enumerated points and subpoints. The protagonist is a CEO condemned to sacrifice everyone he loves—as in, actual blood sacrifice—to appease the shareholders who make his job possible. Bryan Hurt simultaneously creates a contract with the reader through deft metafictional analyses (e.g., “9.4... [T]he story has made certain promises to its readers...10.10...There was only ever one way this story was going to end...”) and eviscerates the upward-mobility-at-all-costs mindset of corporate America, all while making astute readers laugh out loud at word-play and absurdities that—coming from Hurt—don’t seem so much absurd as they seem like an insightful look at what makes us all tick.

Bryan Hurt masters the [art of subtext](#) in both form and content. In the opening story, Hurt packs an entire analysis of ages-old patriarchal influence in love and marriage into fewer than four pages. “The Beast of Marriage” affirms what Jack Kerouac wrote approximately sixty years ago: “Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together...” But in Hurt’s collection, it’s not just boys and girls in America. It’s boys

and girls on their honeymoon in France. It's also a lonely boy missing a girl from his basement, where he builds his own dwarf star and mini-universe and becomes something of a god in his own right. It's also a lonely astronaut missing his father while he walks on the moon. It's also illicit lovers riding in a car that drives itself.

Both hilarious and heartbreaking, Bryan



Everyone Wants to
be Ambassador to
France by Bryan
Hurt

Hurt's stories ask the big questions. In "Panic Attack," Hurt's narrator muses, "What's going to be okay? Are we going to make more money? Be less stuck? Be less tired?" But with the entire collection, Hurt implicitly asks bigger questions like, will everything get better? Are we doomed? Hurt won't explicitly tell you the answer to those questions, but his narrator does tell us what kind of story he wants, which—as a gift to us—is exactly the kind of story that Bryan Hurt writes: "I want a story that answers yes to all of these questions. A story that's definitely not a real story because it tells me that things will get better."

And in an age like this—with fear and terror dominating the media—who even wants real stories anymore? Or put another way, who doesn't want stories that tell us things will get better? Plus, as Bryan Hurt writes with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, "Berets are cute...French is cute. There's nothing more American than being cute."

Matthew J. Hefti holds a BA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, and he is currently pursuing his JD at the University

of Wisconsin Law School. He is a military veteran, having served two combat tours in Iraq and two combat tours in Afghanistan as an explosive ordnance disposal technician. Among other publications, his words have been seen in *Pennsylvania English; War, Literature and the Arts; Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, and Chad Harbach's *MFA v. NYC*. His debut novel, [*A Hard and Heavy Thing*](#) (Tyrus / F+W) is now available where books are sold.