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

After war, most societies look for love. Instead of dealing with the various manifest issues that remain after years of chaos and wanton murder, they seek the understanding and hope that can only be provided by stories based on faith, something greater than the brutal logic of expedience. A certain type of story presents love as a gift to the audience, a sanctuary from the tension brought about by strife, a coherent conclusion. A happy ending. It seems, from reviews of *Preparation for the Next Life*, as well as the recent reception of *American Sniper* and the relationship between Chris Kyle and his wife that forms its logical heart, that many Americans feel that they deserve such a story as well.

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

There are two main characters in *Preparation for the Next Life*. The first to whom readers are introduced is Zhou Lei, an ethnic Uighur from the northwest of China. The Uighurs are Muslims, and the ethnic (Han) Chinese tend to dislike or hate

them, which leads to her being alienated in her own country. Zhou travels from the type of crippling poverty one encounters in the third world to America (land of opportunity), where she is still viewed as an outsider by the predominantly Han Chinese immigrants. Despite the many hardships in her background, Zhou is defined by an inexhaustibly optimistic nature. This optimism draws its power from the myths her mother tells her when she's a child, and is framed logically by her father, who believes in 60's-style nationalistic, pro-Chinese propaganda. It's interesting to see how easily this propaganda fits into Zhou's idea of herself succeeding in the context of Western capitalism, as well.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? I just got out of the army yesterday. I literally just got here. All I want to do is buy you a drink to say

thank you. Howbout it? I mean, you're not talkin' to a bad person."

"I realize that."

He moves on from this rejection, which he handles with characteristic irritation, Skinner heads to a patriotic bar. There, patrons buy him drinks for his service. Despite a desire on the part of readers to, maybe, see Skinner as a good person exposed to the horrors of war (and he *was* exposed to the horrors of war), few soldiers or veterans act, consistently, the way Skinner does – he's been written this way to a purpose, and that purpose, when one reads the entire novel, is a subtle repudiation of the debatable notion that moral injuries sustained in combat lead inexorably to bad ends. Sometimes injury and moral injury does lead to tragic decisions, but more often, as pointed out by thinkers like Nietzsche and Jung, moral injury from war leads to good and decent men growing and expanding – undertaking political service, as in the Greatest Generation, or literary works, as in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*. Skinner is a different breed.

The physical descriptions of war arrive through Skinner's dreams, or shaded recollections, and tend toward the surreal. They feel authentic – the way one sees vivid experiences from the past, unmediated by the conscious mind – especially in the beginning of the deployment: "*They crossed paths with other units, soldiers who had been in heavy house-to-house fighting and there was a bad feeling, like they wanted to hurt somebody and you were it*." As time goes on in the war, readers experience combat like an especially urgent impressionistic painting in which Skinner has become trapped: "*In the arc-weld light, solid forms appeared to shift – the hanging dust. Shadows were running. The drilling deafening thundering never stopped. The razor lights leapt straight across the black, flashed past – he whipped his head around – and they went away and went arcing slowly down like baseballs. The ground and the*

air were being shocked." He loses friends, and (at least at first) dreads his memories of those experiences – until later in the book, when, thoroughly in the grip of the delusion that war can provide some sort of balm for his aching soul, he dreams of the war as a happier place, a time of fellowship and shared purpose.

There's no question that Skinner has encountered severe moral injury based on what he sees and does in combat. He murders civilians, for one thing, and photographs them in awful positions for another – he is a war criminal, in other words, the lowest, most thuggish level of war criminal, but a criminal nevertheless, and carries PTSD. But the ravages of that awful psychological disorder – from which so many veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer – do not explain or excuse his actions in the middle and end of the book. No – in *Preparation for the Next life,* Skinner's choices, in and out of war, belong to him.

The relationship between Zhou Lei and Skinner is complicated, and depends in equal parts what each character represents to the other, which comes down to "escape." Zhou seeks in Skinner a replacement for her father, a sergeant in the Chinese Army who died during one of the collectivization phases of Chinese development in the 70s. To support this dependence on the pro-military narrative in Zhou's life, references to her belief in and admiration for soldiers and the military abound. She claims to have "military training" and admires the trappings of Skinner's service – his military gear, his camouflage, his boots. She does not, however, understand Skinner, and by the time his PTSD manifests and he begins acting as selfishly as he feels, she's trapped with an emotionally abusive, self-destructive adolescent. To Skinner's credit, he often describes precisely what is important to him – his war, his pistol, his dream of one day returning to Iraq – rather than concealing his ambitions. Although he usually talks about the return to combat as a way to make money, it is

quite clearly a dream to destroy himself, for a variety of reasons. Whether Zhou Lei willfully misunderstands Skinner, or it is simply a misunderstanding based on her desire for what he represents is left to the reader. For Skinner's part, he sees Zhou Lei as a sexual object most of the time, and, as time goes on and his condition worsens, alternately as a source of stability and a burden of which to be rid at any cost, until the book's unforgettable and dramatic conclusion.

This fixation on superficial aspects of love helps explain an otherwise curious phenomenon wherein physical fitness correlates with moral health. This, alongside Zhou Lei's idea of soldiers as a sort of ideal, is the most prevalent strand running through the book: immoral or insane characters project internal dissatisfaction through broken bodies, while moral or decent characters do the same through near-religious attendance to working out. Here's one of the primary characters exercising at a public park, in a scene of retreat that evokes Faulkner, Hemingway, and Hawthorne: "*Skinner was doing pushups with his boots up on a ledge. When he was done, he had trouble standing up. He sat down and did nothing for quite a while, just sat at the bottom of a slide, his chin dripping, looking down at the sweat drips falling between his fingers. When he looked up, he saw a pit bull, a beautiful powerful animal with tight glossy skin over striated muscles…*" The primary antagonist, on the other hand, "*looked like a white meaty insect whose exoskeleton has been peeled away exposing the mechanical workings of muscles and white sacks of flesh, which had never been in the open air before.*" The antagonist's family members, too, suffer from physical ailments or deformities that feel linked to the choices they've made in life – the landlady is fat, so much so that she ends up suffering a heart attack. Her daughter, Erin, is described as "giant" when introduced to readers, then again on several occasions. While few would object to the medical assertion that a correlation exists between good health and good spirits (Mr. Carson of this blog argued the contrary

here), *Preparation* actually bases part of its moral hierarchy on disciplined workout regimens, or "military training," as Zhou Lei puts it, so much so that the final image in the book is that of a good character preparing to squat more weight than they have ever before attempted. A character's fitness or health does not mean, necessarily, that they are good, or healthy, but the absence of fitness is a sure sign of spiritual poverty. In the context of the book's ostensible theme, then, characters use working out as a replacement for the affection they don't derive from external sources, or as a means of escape from a world over which they otherwise have no control. Working out, according to the logic of the text, is an activity that leads nowhere, and gives its participants nothing beyond temporary respite from a sense of existential terror that runs like rapids throughout the text.

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

in such a way that one cannot help but grow from reading it.

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American Sniper and the Hero Myth

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

Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with "American" something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many,

many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America's adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French Connection, The Italian Job, The English Patient, The African Queen, The Manchurian Candidate, The Good German*. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

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

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

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle's death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said "live by the sword, die by the sword". Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord's words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentally of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won't be the last.

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

Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.").

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle's story. First of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves "silent professionals" when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle's book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label "war porn", and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

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

such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from

the book: “Savage, despicable evil. That’s what we were fighting in Iraq. That’s why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy “savages.” There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there.”). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

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