

New Poetry by Celeste Schueler: “In Oklahoma, Another Air Force Spouse Tells Me Starlings Are An Invasive Species” and “I First Compared You To A Blue Jay”

Three years before we met,
Friends tell me to stop reading
Virginia Woolf after my suicide
Attempt and an ex-boyfriend
Gifts me a burned CD of
The Beatles at Easter—

New Review by Michael Gruber: “The Myth of the Clean Air War”



A review of Kimberly K. Dougherty's *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*

One of war's most pernicious myths is that new technology will not only hasten its outcome but lessen its brutality. Paul

Fussell describes this delusion in the first pages of his text *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, where he recounts American propaganda images from the 1940s showing “the newly invented jeep, an elegant, slim-barreled 37mm gun in tow, leaping over a hillock.” Such “agility and delicacy,” Fussell contends, conveyed the impression that “quickness, dexterity, and style, a certain skill in feinting and dodging, would suffice to defeat pure force” (1). Subsequently, as World War II began, “everyone hoped, and many believed, that the war would be fast-moving, mechanized, remote-controlled, and perhaps even rather easy” (1). The muck, grime, and hellish attrition of Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, the Hurtgen Forest, and Anzio testify to the contrary.

This myth is not merely restricted to land. Although the airplane has been deployed since the Great War, the enduring fable is that technology has advanced to such a degree that new airframes, because of their sophistication and speed and precision, will end wars quickly, cleanly, and with minimal loss. Such conceits show surprising longevity, being as old as the military use of the airplane itself, and have massive implications for aircrews, the bombed, and especially our beliefs about how modern wars are fought. In her text *Airpower in Literature: Interrogating the Clean War, 1915-2015*, Kimberly K. Dougherty takes these beliefs to task. Her central aim is to contrast these beliefs with various portrayals of the so-called “clean air war” in war literature. In doing so, she puts forward a compelling argument that airpower is an enterprise that is not only slow, messy, and deadly, but has even greater unseen costs, and is spoken about in such ways that the true price of its deployment remains always cloaked in euphemism.

Ironically, Dougherty’s “interrogation” is effective for its precision. She makes many keen observations about these unseen costs, noting that during war, for example, the bodies of air

crews are often "hidden" from view by virtue of their manner of death, being incinerated or blown out of the sky, rendering their remains unrecoverable. Sometimes, these same air crews are presented as "becoming one" with their aircraft, such that what flies are not aviators but a kind of Frankenstein's monster that is half man, half machine. Another insight is that in the numerical tally of an air war's casualties, it is the number of aircraft shot down that seem to be given primacy over human casualties. She notes the long history of airpower's description by military planners and strategists as being "above" the earth, in the domain of the sky, giving it a kind of omnipresence, and where it also gains omniscience, as aircraft can purportedly observe battlefields in ways unavailable to the mere mortals constrained to the ground. All these mythologies, says Dougherty, conspire together to present aerial warfare as "clean," powerful, godlike, and unencumbered by the grotesque violence and terrain of traditional warfare.

Dougherty also makes much of "discursive distancing," which originally refers to a kind of Foucauldian rhetorical analysis that assesses how subjects are allegedly dissociated from hegemonic social systems through discourse, despite ostensibly being benefactors of those same systems. Basically, her point is that the discourse surrounding the use of airpower contributes to its reckless mismanagement. Key to her exploration are two texts, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, which both provide "stunning portraits" of helicopters, "the machine perhaps most associated with the Vietnam War" (145). She notes that the helicopter enjoyed special intimacy with the troops they ferried, being close to the ground and slow, and as such "this intimacy, perhaps, makes it all the more important to separate human from machine, as the borderlines becoming increasingly blurred" (145), and as such they merit a special kind of profile about how the rhetoric of airpower contributes to its inevitable misuse.

But it is Dougherty's concern over this melding together of man and machine that is, in my opinion, the apex of the book, as it leads her to surmise that the rhetoric surrounding the deployment of airpower lends itself to certain beliefs about technology and its use in war. As Dougherty so capably demonstrates, the infatuation with "clean" airpower is naturally sourced in its innovativeness. The trajectory of this infatuation is an alleged "technological war prosecuted solely by machines, with no threat to one's own population" (145), where the human cost of war will have been supposedly entirely eliminated. This reflection becomes especially prescient when one considers the ongoing war in Ukraine, or the 2021 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the use of lethal drones have been notably effective. Additionally, so-called "drone swarms," theoretically composed of thousands of remotely controlled unmanned aerial vehicles, so designed to overwhelm enemy air defenses, have gained currency in the thought of future military planners, both in the West and with our foreign adversaries. While it is not hard to see how Dougherty's bone-chilling vision will manifest, given recent evidence, it is also not hard to see how her description of "clean" airpower's trajectory—that is, its culmination into a supposedly bloodless "technological war," fought primarily with machines—will be anything but another fable in the sprawling compendium of historical fables that have always surrounded how "the next war" will be fought. Propaganda will continue to assert the next war's supposed "cleanliness," highlighting how new technological innovations eliminate the need for the pointless suffering of those archaic and barbaric wars of decades past, only for the "on-the-ground" reality to offer different evidence—that is, the evidence of tens of thousands of mangled corpses of 18, 19, and 20 year-old kids.

All being said, a natural rejoinder to this—which I admittedly found myself asking as I read this text—is "so what?" Is Dougherty's counterargument really that we should not substitute machine for man, given the capability? Or that

Dresden or Tokyo should not have been bombed because the Allies unfairly privileged the lives of its own service members over unarmed civilians? Should a future defensive war fought by the United States not privilege its own service members over the unarmed civilians of belligerents, given such a tragic choice? It seems ludicrous to demand that wars only be fought by one side unilaterally leveraging itself into a potential disadvantage. The Second World War in particular was an existential struggle between mutually exclusive and competing visions for the world, the role of the state, societal organization, and how natural resources should be utilized to serve those ends. It's not hard to see how Dougherty's musings feel like a luxury good given this environment.

But I suspect such a rejoinder misses the point. Dougherty's point isn't to say such things are right or wrong merely—it's that wars are fought with elaborately constructed mythologies about the use of technology (such as airpower), and that military planners and service-members alike not only believe these mythologies, but sometimes even believe them despite knowing they are myths. The cost of believing in such myths is unimaginable brutality and the loss of life to millions of people, as various truths are obscured or unable to be recognized because of the political nature of the war. The geopolitical environment of the Second World War, for example, not only made realities like the humanity of the enemy impossible to recognize, but exaggerated their costs and contributed to immense suffering both among the bombed and the bombers. Such calamity is worth recognizing.

On the more pedantic side, I sometimes found Dougherty's emphases and language distracting, if anything because she too strongly relies on the kind of intersectional analysis and related academic jargon that dominates contemporary humanities publications. In one section, she also provides a summary of the causes contributing to the Spanish Civil War that are

laughably uncritical and overly generous to the Republicans and the Popular Front, which made me suspicious of her framing of other historical events. But these are rather nitpicky when her broader contributions are taken into consideration. Dougherty has ultimately produced a razor-sharp text that attacks the fictions we all too easily attach to the role of technology in warfare. In uncovering beliefs about airpower's "cleanliness," she has produced something worth celebrating.

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Afterlife of Words and Deeds

A recent *Los Angeles Times* review of *A Line in the Sand*, the latest novel by Kevin Powers, the author of seminal Global War on Terror novel *The Yellow Birds*, proposes that GWOT fiction written by veterans, which was much celebrated on its arrival, has lost its luster. Author Mark Athitakis writes, "Two long wars, clumsily entered into and clumsily exited, won't capture the hearts and minds of readers the way they did in 2012." Even more pointedly, Athitakis writes that *A Line in the Sand* "delivers a sense that amid the literary battles of the last decade, the war novel lost. For all its accolades, *The Yellow Birds* and its compatriots aren't much discussed now."

The argument that GWOT fiction and film was once in ascendancy and is now a sideshow intrigues me. I'm on the record for calling the initial flurry of post-9/11 fiction and movies circa 2012 a "Golden Age." In 2018, however, I wrote a *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and*

Literature blogpost titled “Does Anyone Remember *American Sniper*?” I had in mind both the book and the movie, but sticking here with the movie, I described watching it on Sunday afternoon network television while channel surfing. Half-paying attention in between naps, commercials, and trips to the kitchen, my impression was that the movie’s resonance was now deflated, almost flat, as compared to the fever pitch of media commentary occasioned upon its release in 2014. I didn’t state it in the blogpost, but I was also wondering if the cluster of vet-authored fiction, including *The Yellow Birds*, that inspired me to start *Time Now* in 2012, was now past its prime, too.

Musing on the reception and afterlife of GWOT artistic expression, I revisited a 1989 essay by none other than French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Reading Derrida is never a walk-in-the-park, but this essay, titled “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments” is reasonably accessible and full of interesting things, beginning with the title, which for some reason omits the expected colon between “Biodegradables” and “Seven.” In graduate school, I mined the essay often while writing papers on how literature lingers (or doesn’t) in the cultural memory after initial publication.

In “Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments,” Derrida first considers biodegradability as an ecological construct, in keeping with burgeoning worry about the ability of man-made materials to decompose over time. The quote below suggests some of the complexities Derrida finds inherent in biodegradability. The uneven line spacing is not in the original essay, but resulted from my cutting-and-pasting words from a PDF copy of the essay into a Word document. The jaunty result seems to do justice to the often-playful dissonance inherent in Derrida’s thinking and writing:



The issue of biodegradability of course is still with us. Just

this week I read an article about the danger of “micro-plastic” particles—the residue of bazillions of water bottles and plastic bags, tires and food packaging—that infect even the most fervent plastic recyclers and abstainers. The import is that even as, say, a milk jug dissipates over time, its alteration of the environment persists. And as with milk jugs, even more so with nuclear waste and other more toxic chemical residue.

Riffing on biodegradability, Derrida suggests that the concept of biodegradability might be applied to books, magazines, and newspapers. He fancifully proposes that the processes of biodegradation corresponds with what might be said to be the “shelf-live” of publications in libraries. Left to themselves, texts, especially ephemeral ones such as newspapers, lie largely ignored while they disintegrate slowly into oblivion. The question, Derrida intuited in 1988, was becoming massively complicated by the creation of digital libraries and archives, which chart a similar-but-different path from first appearance to obscurity. But Derrida wonders whether the ideas and sentiments contained in texts, like micro-plastic particles, ever really disappear. Perhaps they still circulate in diluted, but still potent or even toxic form throughout culture and the lives of people. Or, perhaps the process of biodegradation can be interrupted or manipulated, and old ideas and texts given new life.

Playful as Derrida’s musing might be, the larger context of “Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments” is serious. It has more connection with war and war-writing than I have made clear so far.

Derrida’s inspiration for writing was a controversy over the discovery that the World War II journalism of another prominent deconstructionist, Paul de Man, was sympathetic to Nazi Germany’s attitude and actions to oppress Europe’s Jewish population. Derrida does not defend de Man, but implies that the long-neglected physical copies of the newspapers in which

de Man's journalism appeared might well have been left to rot. To resurrect them forty years later and hold them afresh for more debate than they received in their own time, Derrida implies, is an abrogation of a "natural" process and thus somewhat unfair to de Man.

That's a curious way of looking at things, for what else are library archives for but to serve as repositories for future scholars to study artifacts of days gone-by? But Derrida does not stop there. Drifting from consideration of physical objects, he proposes that there is such a thing as "cultural biodegradability" that structures the dissolution of a publication's ideas and import into culture over time. He asks, "Can one transpose onto 'culture' the vocabulary of 'natural waste treatment'—recycling, ecosystems, and so on, along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the 'environment' in our societies?" In Derrida's formulation, ideas, like micro-plastics, do not achieve maximum potency only in their original expression, but through a process of permeation of general outlooks and attitudes in what he calls "the great organic body of culture."

For example, upon publication, a book might be read by many and its ideas publicly debated. With time, in most cases, fewer people read the original book, and the book and its ideas begin to fade. Or, though fewer people might read the actual book, knowledge of the book continues to circulate and its ideas seep into the cultural mainstream, where they influence other ideas and in turn are influenced by them. Specific examples (mine, not Derrida's) might include The Bible; not so many have read it cover to cover, but its stories and tenets have been imbibed by all. Or, we might consider the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1854. In its time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was hugely popular and influential in galvanizing abolitionist sentiment in the North. Over the ensuing decades, however, fewer people actually read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but many knew of

it, and colorful characters such as Uncle Tom and Topsy became cultural touchstones, as did the anti-slavery sentiment it promoted. Or, to use examples from the literary theory realm, Thomas Kuhn first proposed and explained his theory of the scientific “paradigm” in a 1962 book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while Laura Mulvey promulgated the idea of the “male gaze” in a 1975 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Not-so-many read these essays today, but the concepts of the paradigm and the male gaze are generally understood by most educated readers.

The concept of cultural biodegradability is interesting to think about in terms of my own area of interest: books, movies, and art about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to Mark Athitakis’ article, we can wonder about the process by which the attention a book such as *The Yellow Birds* commanded upon publication withers over time. Per de Man, we can also think about stories, books, and movies that were overlooked on arrival, but which now possess significance unaccounted for at the time. Also per de Man, we can think about the early writings of now-prominent authors and consider what might happen if we gave them more scrutiny now than when they first appeared.

For example, though the movie version of *American Sniper* now lies fallow in various streaming services, some future critic or scholar might mine it for purposes not apparent now. Or a devotee or devotees will find new ways and new energy to proclaim its importance. However things play out, certain ideas promulgated by *American Sniper* have not stopped resonating, and in fact many have gained valence and saturate thinking about America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among these ideas are the “good man with a gun” sentiment. Or, that special operations represented the most effective means of waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. And another, the idea that soldiers have difficulty transitioning to civilian life after military service.

Whether “biodegradability” or “cultural biodegradability” best describes the processes of public reception and historical reckoning I’m describing, I’m not sure, but I don’t know what the better words are. Derrida doesn’t clearly explain whether an important work (a “classic”) resists biodegradability by continuing to be read in its original form or whether it exemplifies the way the spirit and messages of a work permeates society through a process of dissolution. He also does not clearly distinguish whether cultural biodegradability is an agent-less process—a function of an organic or structural occurrence—or if it can be manipulated by scholars, critics, audiences, marketers, or the creators themselves. I like the idea that worthy books will find their readers as they will, but there’s also plenty of evidence that a book’s reception and long-lasting esteem can be manipulated and is often contested. We see it all the time on social media, for instance, where posts frequently proclaim the overlooked greatness of this-or-that war novel or film.

Still, the ideas in “Biodegradability Seven Diary Fragments” are suggestive, even provocative. In Derrida’s formulation, every act, once committed, and every text, once published, commences a process of dynamic interaction with the culture into which it is born. Most works contribute only slightly to the prevailing milieu, either immediately or over time. Other, more highly charged works retain their influence longer. Some possess a radioactive-like toxicity.

De Man (who died in 1983) probably had little reason to think that his World War II journalism would resurface after his death and to a large extent define his legacy. An early example of today’s cancel-culture wars, the rediscovery of his journalism opened consideration of whether de Man’s expressed views in 1941 negated appreciation of his later contributions to literary theory. Or worse, whether hostility to Jews and sympathy for fascist Germany was part-and-parcel with the philosophy and techniques of deconstruction, with the two sets

of ideas congruent with each other. In other words, you can't have one without the other. As Derrida writes, "the actual stakes, the enemy to be destroyed in these simulacra of trial proceedings, is doubtless not only and not principally the de Man of 1940-42, but 'the Deconstruction' of 1989."

A similar recent case involves the former president of Stanford University. Marc Tessier-Lavigne stepped-down when Stanford students discovered that there was manipulated data in research he published between 2001 and 2008. Tessier-Lavigne has denied the charges and apparently was not the member of his research team responsible for the fraudulent data. But he was listed as one of the authors of the research and thus could not avoid the tarnish of scandal.

What would such a case look like for vet-writers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan? Thoughtless or even shameful early publications, or ones that didn't jibe with the values held by the later and presumably wiser and more mature author? Dishonorable or incompetent service while in uniform, on deployment, or in combat? Disreputable personal conduct? For myself, I've got a string of publications dating back to the 1980s. I think they hold up pretty well, and I've made at least a token effort to rescue some of them from oblivion, in the form of a *Time Now* post that reprinted my contributions to *Military Review* from 2001-2009. My two blogs, *Time Now* and *15-Month Adventure*, are still online for anyone to peruse, and a few scholarly articles are available to those with access to a university library digital archive. I cringe when I think about places in each blog where I might have been unfair or mean to a real person. Fortunately, those places aren't many or particularly egregious, though I still dread the day that I am called on them. My military record is nothing spectacular, but there's also not much to hang me for either, at least not from the highest of trees.

As for my personal life, I like the line from a great Drive-By Truckers song called "The Righteous Path": "I've got a couple

of big secrets / I'd kill to keep hid." My intent is to take my "big secrets" to the grave, but we'll see—secrets are hard to keep buried. Like decades-old journalism and obscure scholarly articles, the particulars of anyone's life are rarely scrutinized until reasons emerge for doing so. The import of cultural biodegradability is that once something is done, it can't be undone, and once something is written, it can't be unwritten, and it all counts.

Mark Athitakis, "What Happened to All the War Vet Novelists? They've Moved On and So Have We." *Los Angeles Times*. May 12, 2023.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-12/what-happened-to-all-the-war-vet-novelists-theyve-moved-on-and-so-have-we>

Jacques Derrida, "Biodegradables Seven Diary Fragments." *Critical Inquiry* 15.4, Summer 1989. Peggy Kamuf, a frequent translator of Derrida, is here named as co-author.

Peter Molin, "Whatever Happened to American Sniper?" *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature*. July 2018.

<https://acolytesofwar.com/2018/07/01/does-anyone-remember-american-sniper/>

Peter Molin, "Before *Time Now: Military Review Book Reviews, 2001-2009*." *Time Now: The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in Art, Film, and Literature*. January 2023.

<https://acolytesofwar.com/2023/01/14/before-time-now-military-review-book-reviews/>

Peter Molin, *15-Month Adventure: US Army Advisor Service, Khost and Paktya Provinces*. 2008-2012.

New Fiction by Matthew J. Hefti: “Jean, not Jean”



Illustration by Matthew J. Hefti

Jean, not Jean

by Matthew J. Hefti

When I look in the mirror, I think I look stupid. Otherwise, I don't even think of how I look. But when I do look in the mirror, it's like I can't look away. Also when I do, I pick a lot. Today is especially bad.

My mom said once that it's anxiety from stress.

My dad said, he's thirteen. What's he got to be stressed about?

I'm pretty torqued on the way to school. I don't really know why. I think it's because I missed the bus. I missed the bus because I couldn't stop picking at myself, and I think it's because I can feel everything—like how tight my socks are and how my feet are already a little moist and my socks aren't doing anything about it, and my shirt's a little tight in the

armpits and it's pulling at my armpit hairs, and one of the hairs in my eyebrows is curled or something and it's really annoying me, and I think maybe I have a hair growing in my ear. I'm not sure.

My mom asks what she can do to put me in a better mood.

I tell her that she doesn't have to do anything.

She says my happiness is important.

It's important to you, I tell her.

Jean isn't at school today. He's probably my best friend. He had an allergic reaction yesterday. He's allergic to pretty much everything.

Mr. Rogers is subbing again because Mrs. Neumann is sick. Mr. Rogers hates when we call him that and tells us to call him anything but that. We called him all kinds of things for a while, like Mr. Fluffy Head and Poo Poo Bear, but it got boring because he really meant what he said about being able to call him anything. He didn't care.

You wouldn't guess it by his name, but Mr. Rogers is this tough looking dude that used to be in the military. He still has a flat top.

Mr. Rogers calls Jean's name three times, pausing for infinity each time as if it's not completely obvious there's an empty desk and no one is responding. But he says it like Jean, like something you wear or like he's a girl, but his name is Jean, like Victor Hugo's hero. It rhymes with Shawn. You'd think he'd know that by now.

I've never read anything by Victor Hugo, but that's what

Jean's mother always says when someone says it wrong: It's Jean, she says. Like the greatest hero in western literature, drawn in full by Victor Hugo. Except she says litra-ture. And then if people say, who's that, she won't answer. She just snorts a little like they're stupid.

I asked his mom once if I could see the picture of the Jean in the book. She said, What do you mean? I said, the one drawn by Victor Hugo. She snorted. I guess she thinks I'm stupid.

Jean told me that his mom named him that because the Jean in the book is like a kind of Christ.

I asked him what that was supposed to mean since there's only one God.

He said, he's not Christ. He's a type of Christ.

I said, you can't be a type of something if there's only one of that thing.

He said he asked his dad about it once and his dad said that the only thing he's the hero of is the miserable ones.

Who? I said. Jean or Christ?

Jean shrugged. Both I guess.

I used to call him Jean too. Even though it's Jean, not Jean. Everyone did. He's small and kind of nerdy looking. Plus he's sick a lot, and saying Jean made us feel stuck up. But now most of us have gotten used to it. It's just his name.

I didn't call him Jean because he was nerdy. I called him that because he was my arch nemesis. He stole my job as milk

monitor last year, when we were in sixth grade. Each of us had a class duty, and I had the best one.

It wasn't the best because counting the orders and getting the milks at lunch was so great or anything. But the milk monitor for the fifth and sixth grade classroom had to go with the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth grade classroom. And Heather Saint James was the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth graders. Heather Saint James didn't have the prettiest face—that was Jennifer Gohrman—but she did have the biggest boobs in the school.

The way it worked was, the older kid would bring the milk crate and wait by our door. That was like the signal to Mrs. Neumann that she needed to wrap it up. Then she'd say, raise your hand if you want chocolate. Then, raise your hand if you want white. You'd count the hands and then go to the gym closet with the older kid to get the milks, and then you'd bring them back.

Heather Saint James would put the milk crate on the ground to slide open the big fridge door to get the milks and put them into the crate.

I could see right down her shirt where those big heavy things were hanging. While she waited for me to stammer the count for our class, she would stay bent over like that with her hand on the bottom shelf. Like she didn't even realize they were there.

To get to the gym closet, you had to walk through the whole school and then finally the principal's office. You could go through the gym instead of the principal's office, but we weren't allowed to go that way.

When I was in fifth grade and David Pfeiffer was the milk monitor, I thought they made them go through the office because they were afraid the milk monitors would start playing in the gym on the way there. That was before Jean even went to our school.

But then when I got older, I realized that didn't make any sense because all the balls and toys and stuff were stored in the gym closet, which is where you had to go to get the milks anyway.

After I had spent some time as the milk monitor myself, I realized they made you go through the principal's office because they were probably afraid that if you went through the gym, you'd probably goof off in other ways. I never did though.

Jean says I chickened out and had plenty of chances, but that's not what happened. What happened is that he stole my job.

One day while I was doing the sweater stare—it was fall by then—I had forgotten the count when Heather Saint James asked me the numbers. I thought fast and gave her two numbers that added up to eleven. That's how many students we had in our class after all.

But Jean doesn't drink milk. He's allergic. According to his mom, deathly allergic. So the real number was supposed to add up to ten.

I should have guessed that anyway because that's how many kids had been in my class my whole life until Jean showed up. But I remembered the new kid made us eleven.

It wasn't the first time I had gotten the numbers wrong. It

wasn't even the first time I made the mistake of bringing back eleven milks. But the first time I did it doesn't count. I just did it that time because I thought that Mrs. Neumann would let me have the extra chocolate instead of taking it back.

She didn't like that.

I told her I couldn't take it back because Heather Saint James already went back to her classroom.

She told me that she was sure I would find my way. She was always saying that, even when it didn't make sense in context.

The time I forgot the numbers on accident, she asked why I brought back the wrong number of chocolate milks again.

I told her it was because I forgot Jean was allergic to milk.

She said, you know who won't forget that Jean is allergic to milk?

No, I told her.

Jean. That's who.

So she made Jean the milk monitor.

When I told my dad what happened, he laughed and said, Well, there's dramatic irony for you.

I was pretty mean to Jean for a while. Then one day he asked why I cared about being milk monitor so much, and I told him it was obvious.

He said it wasn't obvious to him.

I mentioned Heather Saint James.

He said, that's it? Then he claimed he didn't care about that because he could look at all the boobs he wanted because they had the internet at home. I think he just wanted me to like him.

He offered to stick his finger in one of the milk cartons so I could get the job back. I think he wanted to be liked so badly that he would have really done it, but I told him not to because they might give the job to anyone. And if someone else got the job, he'd just be risking his life for nothing.

It made me feel bad that he was so obsessed with being liked that he would risk his life to get a friend and also give up the chance to sneak peeks down the shirt of Heather Saint James.

So I said sorry for being so mean and that I wouldn't view him as my arch nemesis anymore.

After me and Jean became friends, I asked him why he came to our school.

Jean said the public school told him he missed too many days. He didn't want to be stuck in fifth grade.

So I asked him why he could be in sixth grade in our school when everyone said it was harder than the public school.

He said the state couldn't tell our school what to do. Then he said our school was just as easy as public school. But going to any school is a waste of time, he said.

He had a point there.

When I asked him why he didn't just get home schooled, he said his mom told him that all home school kids are weird.

He had a point there too.

But why our school? I asked. You're not even Christian.

Yes I am, he said.

But you don't go to our church, I pointed out.

Are you stupid or just brainwashed? he asked.

I told him he could use some milk of human kindness.

We both had a good laugh at that one.

It was milk that gave Jean the reaction yesterday, but it could have been anything considering practically half the normal foods in the world are like phosgene or mustard gas to him. I learned about phosgene and mustard gas yesterday in history class, not from Mr. Rogers, but from Jean.

When history class started, Mr. Rogers asked what we were learning about from Mrs. Neumann.

Jean told him World War One.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand and said, why do we always have to learn about wars in history class?

Mr. Rogers told her it was because wars were like the epicenter of an earthquake in a country's timeline with seismic waves moving out in every direction. If you wanted to, he said, you could pick any given war and study the whole country's history just by studying that war. You could ask yourself what led to the war and then what were the consequences of the war. By asking what led to the war, you could go as far back into history as you wanted. By asking what the consequences of the war were, you could study all the history from the war until the present and then as far into the future as infinity if you wanted.

Tabby Gardner told him we'd already been studying World War

One for infinity.

I have to admit, I was pretty bored myself.

Well, Mr. Rogers said, if a war is like an earthquake in a country's timeline, then wouldn't a World War be like an earthquake in the entire world's timeline? So doesn't it make sense to spend time studying it?

Okay, Tabby Gardner said, but we already know everything about it.

Then tell me what you know about the war, Mr. Rogers said.

Jean raised his hand, like always.

Mr. Rogers said, I want to hear from Tabby. But then she didn't say anything for a long time, and Mr. Rogers called on Jean, like always.

Did you know, Jean said, that in World War One, they used phosgene and mustard gasses? Also, did you know that the Germans would hit troops with gasses that could get through the gas masks? It would hurt their eyes and nose and stuff so bad that they would take off their masks, even though that could kill them. Then after taking off their masks, they'd inhale the phosgene and mustard and stuff like that. Their lungs would start to blister and their eyes would bleed or they'd start coughing so bad they could puke up their stomachs and all sorts of stuff.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand.

Mr. Rogers called on her.

Real prissy she said, can we please not talk about blistered lungs and puked up stomachs?

You could tell Mr. Rogers was thinking about it because he didn't say anything for a while.

Then he said, so like I was saying before about the earthquakes, I actually know a guy who got messed up really bad—big red oozing blisters all over his body—after he put a mustard round in his truck thinking it was a regular old projo.

Then he told us all about IEDs made with chlorine tanks, stock piles of mustard rounds, troops that got gassed that couldn't get benefits once they got home, and how the whole reason we were there was because some General convinced the UN that there were WMDs there.

Jean ate it up. He loved that kind of stuff.

But what happened with the milk yesterday was, after history class we had lunch. I was reading the joke on my milk carton, and I said, I don't get it.

The jokes were like numbered in a series. Everyone with a number five, for example, would have the same stupid joke. An example would be, Why was the cow jumping up and down? Because it wanted a milkshake. But that wasn't the actual joke yesterday.

Mr. Rogers was at his desk eating his lunch and drinking his milks—he always ordered two chocolates. He asked me what number I had.

Twelve, I told him.

Me too, he said. It's a pun.

But I don't get it, I told him.

He said, you know back when I was in school, milk cartons didn't have jokes. They had pictures of missing kids.

But these have jokes, and I don't get this one.

Instead of jokes, we'd have to look at pictures of these kids who were abducted, he said.

Jean asked what the joke was.

Mr. Rogers said, it's not a joke. It's a pun.

Then Jean said, well then read me the pun.

Mr. Rogers said, you wouldn't get a pun like this if I told it to you. You have to read it.

I can't read it myself, Jean said. I'm allergic to milk.

When I was a kid, Mr. Rogers said, we didn't have all these allergies either. All this helicopter parenting. Kids are too sheltered these days. Protected from everything so they can't handle anything.

I think Jean didn't want to look weak in front of Mr. Rogers. He grabbed my milk carton to look at it for himself. And I guess a little spilled on him or something because it wasn't long before he started turning red and wheezing and everything.

It's a good thing Mr. Rogers was subbing that day, because Mrs. Neumann probably would have freaked out. She's the nervous type, but Mr. Rogers has all that war training.

Mr. Rogers acted all calm like it was no big deal. He asked Jean if he had an EpiPen and where it was. It was in his desk, so Mr. Rogers grabbed it in no time and gave him the shot. Then he pointed at someone and said, you, go down the hall and have the secretary call 911. Then he pointed at me and said, you, go in the top pocket of my backpack by the right side of my desk. There's an EpiPen in there. Bring it to me.

In pretty much no time, the ambulance had come to take Jean to the hospital.

Mr. Rogers said it was just a precaution.

Jean loves Mr. Rogers. Every time he subs, Jean spends all recess talking to him, and Mr. Rogers doesn't seem to mind.

But today at morning recess, Mr. Rogers just stands at the corner of the soccer field with his hands in his pockets. He swings his foot back and forth like he's kicking apart an ant hill or something, but he does it the whole time. He never looks up at the kids to make sure we're not fighting or anything.

Mr. Rogers looks pretty lonely without Jean there. But before recess is over, the principal comes out and says something to him. Mr. Rogers doesn't say anything back. He just goes inside early and the principal follows after him.

I asked Jean once why he wanted to waste all his recess time talking to the teacher about boring stuff like history.

He said we had to study history because those who don't study history will be doomed to repeat it.

Sounds like the opposite would make more sense. If you don't know about it, it would be pretty random to repeat it, which makes repeating it seem pretty unlikely.

I told him so, and he said we should ask Mr. Rogers what he thought.

I told Jean I'd just take his word for it.

But I guess Mr. Rogers is pretty lousy at the whole not repeating history thing. What I mean by that is, Mr. Rogers isn't in the classroom when we get back inside from recess.

While we're all just waiting around, I hear Paisley Schmitt say they fired him because he was talking about bleeding eyeballs and coughed up stomachs during history class yesterday.

That makes sense coming from her.

I say that because the first time Mr. Rogers subbed for us, he told us not to ask if he killed anyone unless we wanted him to kill us. Then the principal made him apologize to the whole class after Paisley Schmidt narced on him to her mom.

And it's doubly believable because Mrs. Neumann shows back up, even though she still looks sick and sounds like she's going to cough up her stomach.

I don't think Mr. Rogers is as great as Jean does, but I think he's okay. He says bad words sometimes when he's telling stories, and you don't often get to hear a teacher say swear words. It's easy to distract him and his stories are pretty good. Better than Mrs. Neumann's anyway.

But that's kind of just how he is. He'll talk to you like you're on the same level.

Like when he started his apology speech after Paisley Schmitt narced on him. He said, apparently, you're not supposed to talk about killing with middle schoolers. You could tell he thought the whole thing was stupid by the way he said apparently.

Me and Jean had a good laugh at that too.

New Fiction: Excerpt from Hilary Plum's Strawberry Fields

An excerpt from the novel [*Strawberry Fields*](#). Alice, a reporter, and the detective Modigliani are both working on the case of five murdered veterans of the Iraq War (including Kareem, named below). The investigation has extended in many directions, including toward the private military contractor Xenith, with whom the victims were involved.



Alice

Modigliani came over, a bottle brown-bagged in his hand. I'd hoped for wine but it was gin. He poured for us both and produced a jar of olives from his jacket, with his fingers dropped three into each glass. Thank you, I'm sure, I said, eyeing the greasy floating pimentos. Your table sucks, he said, rocking it back and forth with his hand.

The death of Farzad Ahmad Muhammad, I said.

OK, Modigliani said.

You remember it, I insisted. He was murdered in US custody. A British journalist got interested, and so there was an actual military follow-up. A few guys were held responsible, or kind of—I pushed photos toward him, tapped each face in turn—this

one spent two months in jail, this one was demoted, this one not even discharged. These photos, I added, were Kareem's. He was working on some kind of amateur investigation.

OK, Modigliani said.

Modigliani bent down and slid the lid of the olive jar under the short leg of the table. Now we have to finish these, he said. How did he die?

I said: He was hanging from the ceiling by his hands, which is common practice, but he was left there for days, and they beat his legs to interrogate him, the backs of his knees. *Pulpified*, is how the autopsy describes his legs—if he hadn't died, they'd have had to amputate. They said the beatings were normal, but none of them realized how many teams were going at him, how many altogether, and blood pooled around the injuries until his heart stopped, with him just hanging there. They found him on the morning of the fifth day.

Modigliani nodded. And where does Kareem come in?

He knew one of the guys who was later held responsible, the guy who went to jail. They were based out of the same compound for a while, they met socially, if that's the right word. I'm trying to see if maybe Kareem is the one who tipped off the journalist in the first place. Like, he gathered this evidence to give it to her.

And this works out to a motive for killing Kareem, what, seven or eight years later?

Fuck, I said, fuck.

Modigliani stacked the photos and pushed them back toward me, maneuvering around drinks and olives. He said: If the guy who killed the prisoner was Kareem's friend, Kareem could have been looking to get him off, not get him punished. But you know that. Not to mention, he added, that we have four other

victims.

I know, I said. The photo on top was of the bruised legs, and I covered it with both hands.

Alice-Modigliani said, looking in the direction of the air conditioner—your thinking is the opposite of conspiratorial. It's the web without the spider.

He said: I think I've always liked that about you.

Later I understood this was the one thing he ever said that I truly believed.

If I were a conspiracy theorist, he went on, I'd think you were trying to distract this investigation from its real target.

Bill LeRoy, I said obediently, Xenith.

Right now he's angling to replace the military in Afghanistan, Modigliani said. All private contractors, private air force. British East India Company model.

I said: At the same time he's selling his forces to countries hoping to keep migrants in or migrants out. Or rather, Muslims out. Turn back the boats at gunpoint.

Modigliani shifted and I thought he was going to lay his hands over the photo, over my own.

What happens, I wondered, when a spider mistakes itself for a fly?

Modigliani finished his drink and rose. The table rocked again.

Have you ever noticed, he said, how rarely I ask a question?

After Modigliani left I went on: I'd called the guy who'd served time, the guy Kareem knew. He was punished most severely because he'd visited the prisoner the most and was supposed to be the one signing off, keeping track of the others.

I was only halfway through Kareem's name when the woman who had answered the phone interrupted: He doesn't know anything. Don't call here again. She was gone and with her the background sound of a child's off-key singing. I called again. I thought of going out there, to the Midwestern farmland where they lived, not far from where I used to visit a long-dead uncle of my mother's. Amish in buggies or on bicycles on the road's shoulder, cornfields, trampolines in yards that back then I'd coveted. He was a farm boy, this man, and at first I thought this should damn him. Shouldn't a boy like that have known, have understood the body and what it won't endure? Only once did they unhook Muhammad from the ceiling and by then he could no longer bend his knees. But tonight, the refrigerator assuming the role of crickets, the floor athrum with someone's bass, I understood why this made no difference.

Strawberry Fields was published in April, 2018 and is available from [Fence Books](#) or your local bookseller.

THE WORDS ON THE INTERNET

SAID MICHAEL HERR HAS DIED

Where were you when Michael Herr died in 2016? What were you doing? Did you listen to the opening voiceover of *Apocalypse Now*? Martin Sheen's main character said "all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one." Did you watch Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* at the helicopter scene when Matthew Modine's Joker asks the doorgunner "How can you shoot women and children?" "Easy," the gunner replies, "you don't lead 'em so much." Or did you go right to the original source, a first edition of Herr's *Dispatches* from the bookshelf and flip to the passage when Herr overheard a bunch of infantrymen watching a helicopter full of journalists fly off an LZ, leaving Herr behind—"one rifleman turning to another, and giving us all his hard, cold wish: 'Those fucking guys,' he'd said. 'I hope they die.'"

I did none of those things. I was aware of them all, though, when my internet surfing tripped up against the news that Michael Herr had died. The journalist that I, like all my peers who once reported from Iraq, Afghanistan, Panama, Yemen and all the other places, wished we could have been.

It had been a long time since Herr had written anything, the last a short book about his dead friend Stanley Kubrick. The ultimate sin for any writer is silence, and by my reckoning Herr had chosen silence since 2001—an interview in a documentary "First Kill," and nothing since. The author of *Dispatches*, the book that is the accepted highest standard for embedded reporting, had nothing to say about 15 years of war in the Middle East and South America in which journalists of all size and stripe broke their backs to emulate his style, approach, and see-it-all mindset. He had nothing to say about any of it—no comment on Sebastian Junger's calling his own book *War*, as though it could somehow be definitive; no television commentary on Fox News or PBS, no taking a stand

one way or the other; Herr neither boasted nor complained when reporters and freelancers, present company included, aped his surrealistic style in ways much more akin to plagiarism than homage.

I emulated him from my first moment in Iraq as a reporter in 2007. I got off a helicopter at the LZ at Forward Operating Base Summerall and a young captain offered to take my bags. "I packed them," I told him, "I'll hump them." I learned that lesson from Herr, who wrote "I never let the grunts dig my holes or carry my gear." And I thought of Herr when I first introduced myself to the soldiers at the Bayji Joint Security Station, where I arrived a month after a truck bomb nearly destroyed the place. The soldiers would look at me with either a scowl or a strange grin. Like Herr said, "It was no place where I'd have to tell anyone not to call me 'Sir.'"

When I got back, I couldn't wait to talk about it, sending photos and stories here, there, everywhere, hustling up any publication I could. That was 2007.



Goodbye to all that.

Now, it's been eight years since my last time in Iraq. I think about it every day. I wonder how my life would have played out, if I hadn't gone? Would I have been one of the ignorant yahoos yelling at TV, certain that my opinion was the right one?

Maybe Herr's silence was a form of discipline. If he realized he had nothing left to say, maybe it makes sense. Otherwise it was a sin, for bottling up his wisdom and pulling a Salinger while the world crashed down around him. Call it coping, choosing peace and quiet over the endless cacophony that's only gotten worse—why demean oneself in such a world? Would his opinion or observation have carried any extra weight because of a book he wrote in 1977? Chances are much better

that in raising his voice, he would have only made another more target for revisionist history. What did he make up? Is *Dispatches* really nonfiction? Composite characters? Is he a fabulist? Did he even *go* to Vietnam?

Iraq and Afghanistan were chockfull of Pentagon lies, media misperceptions, and first-person “so there I was” memories. What would one more blowhard have added to the mix?

Instead, Herr retreated into the silence—not even mystery, since there was no Salinger-esque clamor for his reemergence. Surely, we was sought out now and then, but those entreaties didn’t reach the public (at least as far as a Google search can find).

Three movies, three books; that was his output, more or less. And hardly full credit for all of them – he wrote voiceovers for *Apocalypse Now* and *The Rainmaker*, and co-wrote the screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket*. Most of *Full Metal Jacket*’s dialogue came directly from Gustav Hasford’s underrated *The Short Timers*. R. Lee Ermey took a lot of credit for improvising the drill sergeant’s dialogue—but plenty of his profane monologues are right from the book; anyway, Hasford died in 1993, so he’s not around to correct anybody.

And Hasford’s no saint. I own his personal copy of *Dispatches*, annotated with quite a few short references, including a few times where Hasford wrote in pencil: “Problem. Did I steal this?” next to scenes that appear suspiciously like moments from *Dispatches*. Nothing major: a scarf on a character, a description of a spooky night. Maybe the word “spooky” itself, which both Hasford and Herr loved and used in equal measure.

Herr co-wrote the screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket* with Stanley Kubrick, but Kubrick didn’t have the balls to go for Hasford’s original vision—in the movie, the drill sergeant is killed by Vincent D’Onofrio’s tubby Private Pyle. It’s the same in the book—with the vital change that the Gunny knows

what's coming, knows Pyle has lost his marbles and is about to shoot him dead—and the Gunny is proud of him. He created a killer and he knows it.

The second change is even starker. In the movie, a sniper kills Joker's friend Cowboy, and later, Joker kills the female sniper.

In the book, the sniper is never seen, picking off members of Cowboy's squad one-by-one until finally Cowboy is in the sniper's sights, shot in the legs so he can't move. The sniper intends to draw each desperate man in the squad out from cover as they try to rescue their wounded.

Joker knows this, so Joker shoots Cowboy, who knows it's coming and whose last words are "I never liked you, Joker. I never thought you were very funny."

In 1987, it's unlikely a movie audience would have accepted a conclusion where one American soldier mercy-kills another. A lot had changed since 1979's *Apocalypse Now*, which ended with Martin Sheen's Willard decapitating Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz.

The modern version would probably feature Navy SEAL Team Six swooping in at the last minute, rescuing Cowboy and Joker as Mark Wahlberg laid down suppressing fire and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson karate-chopped whatever faceless Muslim jihadist villain presented a threat. He would probably choke a female Muslim terrorist to death with her own *hijab* headdress – saying "That's a wrap, *bitch*."

It makes sense that Michael Herr remained silent, given our current culture. He'd lived long enough to see Vietnam demystified and reconstructed—turned into "do we get win this time?" foolishness matched with Vietnam's real-life economic boom. Vietnamese tourist posters once used the English slogan "A Country, Not a War." By 2017, it's doubtful that clarification is even necessary.

Herr became a devout Buddhist, meditating at his home in upstate New York. It certainly sounds like a man at peace with himself, who was coping just fine with everything he'd seen and done.

This generation of soldiers, journalists, and contractors has just started reckoning with these issues. As a coping method, "silence" is certainly the last choice many of us have made. Dignity, modesty, humility—all surrendered just like the old Iraqi firebases were lost to ISIS, overrun while we weren't even looking. Who can blame us? This merry-go-round has too many brass rings hanging just within reach: book deals, screenplays, talking slots on news programs and bytes of space in internet columns, essays in collections that might be read, might not. So much to say, and too many years to go before Herr's perspective is finally attained.

What it comes down to, maybe, is trying to add to the obituary — to overcoming that sense of dismay when one realizes its first paragraph is likely written. Herr got there — he knew what the first paragraph would basically say: "Author of this, screenwriter of that; lauded as a visionary journalist who created a new method of war reporting, who turned the businesslike voice of Ernie Pyle inside out, crafting war reporting as a surrealistic nightmare—and yet so entertaining." They didn't say that in so many words, but it would have been honest if they had—and I'm not sure to call it "entertaining" is a compliment. Herr did show that war reporting—embedded reporting, specifically—could capture the soldier's voice and life while keeping the real focus on the writer. Pyle didn't, not really. Herr's prize—and curse—was presenting his story first and foremost. For those of us today writing in first person, third person, it doesn't matter—it's a means to an end, and the byline is often the subject.

My bookshelf is full of novels and nonfiction telling war stories from dozens of points of view. There is the patriotic jerkoff next to the self-flagellating regret; the melodramatic

tale of a bright-eyed lieutenant rests on top of the cynical observer laughing at his own joke; a detached reporter unwilling to choose a side rests on a shelf full of world-weariness and guilt. My own literary attempt is right there with them—all my reporting packaged in my own self-produced creation, a marketing tool and manuscript to send to publishers back when I had something to say. It doesn't hold up—my conclusions fall apart, what I think I saw in 2009 revealed as a mirage just a few years later. I'm glad it wasn't published.

I'm certainly like to hear myself talk like the rest of them—I write reviews of books related to the wars, offering my take on somebody else's. Now and then, I trundle to a library or small venue where the silverhairs spend an evening, and I narrate my photos and encapsulate my three summers spent in Iraq. It's a paying gig; I can reuse my script and just make sure to change the venue's name when I thank them for having me. I know the questions that they'll ask. It's all very familiar, and if it's boring to me, I tell myself it's maybe new to them, and isn't that worth something?

I was in the Army, went to Iraq in Desert Storm decades ago. I play the veteran's card when I can, an easy comeback against the sunshine patriots of this rancid and toxic modern era. But like my presentations, it all starts to feel a little hoary, my version of Fat Elvis creaking out "Love Me Tender."

Still, in writing classes, I do enjoy using different drafts of my work as examples of revision—to show how the overblown melodrama of the first draft becomes a reasonable conclusion by the final. It's a form of coping, the drafting and revision that is—working out the absurdities that no audience should be subjected too. But like I tell the students: You don't know that at the time. I meant it when I wrote it. Nobody sets out to write a bad first draft.

Think of our emotional investment with a first draft as a kind

of reverence—we're so pleased with our words, with our thoughts and with ourselves. The revision process requires us to be—in Lester Bangs' perfect words—*contemptuously indifferent*, to be willing to cut things out without passion or prejudice.

In that vein, I have deliberately disconnected with the soldiers I spent that Iraq time with, eliminating our ties on social media—no harm done, no big blowups, just a casualty of their grotesque Trumpian politics and my disinterest in tolerance of the same. We weren't friends. What was it we spent together in Iraq? A month? Three? In the scheme of my 50 years, no time at all. It's an edit; a paragraph in my story that doesn't fit anymore.

If I walked into a classroom and started spouting the virtues of *Dispatches*, I'd be preaching to a room of those who have never heard the name of the book or the author. I would have to spend time raving about it, and who is interested in hearing some old man run his mouth about the "bad old days of jubilee?" There are so many other books to read, and who says *Dispatches* is better than any other? I thought it was Michael Herr, you thought it was David Finkel or Sebastian Junger or Clinton Romesha or Siobhan Fallon, or *Zero-Dark-Thirty* or *Lone Survivor* or whoever or whatever you thought spoke to what you expected a war experience to read like, to look like, to capture the violence and the chaos in a way that made you say: "they got it." You wouldn't believe me if I said there was a time when we agreed on Michael Herr. He's been copied and parodied and distilled and diluted until he's just another name from another time, another war, and what's he really got to do with what we're talking about anyway?

Elvis Presley died in August, 1977, and *Dispatches* would be published two months later. In the next 10 years, Herr would then help on *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*—that trio arguably the most iconic creative outputs born from Vietnam. But from 1987 to his death in 2016, nothing of true note.

Still, enough that, for a time, Michael Herr was the agreed upon war reporting standard—the center of the spoke from which everything would radiate.

What does Elvis have to do with it? Because Lester Bangs' 1977 prediction was right: When it comes to rock and roll, my generation has never agreed on anything like our parents once agreed on Elvis. When it comes to war reporting, no future generation of reporters will agree like we once did on Michael Herr. And nobody—*nobody*—will ever repeat his decision to sit on the sidelines during 15 years of war filled with reportage from so many of his imposters—and say *nothing*.

I am the most envious of that. His ability to take himself out of the game, to accept that what he had to say was said, in a book on a shelf. If we ever want to know what he thinks, we can always go right there, to words that will not change.

I've left behind my own record, of stories here and there, of essays and reviews in this publication or that. In my reporting, I did my part to make these wars palatable for the masses. I feel a hint of moral crime in that participation. And it happened during a war. Put war and crime together, and what do you come up with? Did that thought occur to Michael Herr? Did he see all his copycats and sycophants and think "be careful what you wish for?"

Michael Herr showed us how to cope in a world riven by noise and discontent. Just be quiet. He has been dead for many months, but I need not bother to say goodbye to his corpse. I only wish I could say goodbye to you.

With much respect for Lester Bangs, and Elvis Presley.

Nathan Webster reported from Iraq in 2007-09 as a freelance photojournalist. He is also an Army veteran of Desert Storm. His work appears in many publications.

An Interview with Taylor Brown, Author of Gods of Howl Mountain

✖
The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Taylor Brown is the author of a collection of short stories, [In the Season of Blood and Gold](#), and three novels: [Fallen Land](#), hailed by Booklist as “a masterpiece;” [The River of Kings](#), and [Gods of Howl Mountain](#), out next month (March 2018), of which a starred Booklist review said:

It's the characters, so wonderfully vibrant and alive in their all-too-human variety—scared, tightly wound, angry, damaged, yet resourceful and resilient, some honorable, some not—that demonstrate Brown's prodigious talent. Brown has quickly established himself in the top echelon of Southern writers.

An [excerpt](#) from *Gods of Howl Mountain* appears in this month's issue of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

Thank you so much for answering our questions, Taylor.

Let's start with some background on *Gods of Howl Mountain*. The novel is set in rural North Carolina in the 1950s. Rory Docherty, a young man freshly home from the Korean War, has returned to the mountain where he grew up. He lives with his grandmother, a folk healer; his father is dead and his mother, mute since witnessing a terrible crime, has lived most of her life in a mental hospital nearby. Rory finds work running bootleg whiskey for a powerful local family. But when he falls

for the daughter of a preacher, he gets himself into a new brand of trouble that may open up secrets about his mother and his past.

Begging my own Yankee ignorance here: Is there a Howl Mountain, North Carolina? How did you develop a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains and its long legacy of family feuds, bootlegging, folk medicine, snake-handling, and more?

Taylor Brown: There is no Howl Mountain, North Carolina – the place and history are products of my own imagination. That said, I was inspired by the history and folklore of Blowing Rock, a town in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. The town itself is named after “The Blowing Rock,” a rock formation that stands three thousand feet above the Johns River Gorge and is storied for a powerful wind that blows upward out of the gorge. Legend has it, a heartbroken Native American brave leapt from the cliff, only to be blown back into the arms of his lover. That idea of mysterious winds inspired the cyclonic updrafts at the top of Howl Mountain, which I do envision as being in roughly the same area as Blowing Rock. However, I wanted to be free to create a geography and history of my own.

Though I grew up on the Georgia coast, I’ve long had a fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the world of bootlegging, folk medicine, stock car racing, and more. As a child, I remember hearing my father play the song “Copperhead Road” by Steve Earle, still one of my favorite songs. The narrator is a Vietnam vet whose family has been involved in bootlegging for years, and who returns from Vietnam to begin growing the new cash crop of the region – marijuana. I can remember sitting in front of the stereo in my dad’s study as a kid, playing that song over and over again.

Like most of my novels, *Gods of Howl Mountain* started with a short story. This time it was “Kingdom Come,” the second story in my collection, *The Season of Blood and Gold*. With that

story, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in this time and place. In fact, it was a large part of my motivation to move to western North Carolina in 2009, where I lived for two years—first in Asheville, then in Black Mountain, NC.

It's strange how organic these books become over the years. In 2013, I met Jason Frye, a writer who has become a great friend and editor of mine. Jason is from Logan, West Virginia, and his grandfather used to catch rattlesnakes to sell to the serpent-handling churches in the area. Jason has a black-and-white photograph of this one-armed snake-handling preacher on his office wall, and he directed me toward Dennis Covington's incredible book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Later, I ended up seeing someone who was in herb school in Asheville, and she was an incredible help for the specifics of Granny May's folks medicine.

So, as you can see, this story has traveled quite a long road with me.

WBT: I can't help but notice that many of your novels and stories feature characters whose lives have bumped up against the vast movements of history and, in particular, war. There's Callum and Ava in *Fallen Land*, for example, caught up in General Sherman's "March to the Sea" in the final year of the American Civil War; or Lawton in *The River of Kings*, who's still grappling with the legacy of his recent service in ways that sometimes baffle or worry his college-student brother. In *Gods of Howl Mountain*, Rory is a Korean war vet and amputee, and you've mentioned that your newest work-in-progress features a female Army vet as well. Where do you think your attentiveness to veterans comes from—and your—what I would call—remarkably mature, long-range, compassionate interest in the ways war shapes whole generations, whole nations?

TB: That's a very good question, Andria. I've begun writing a little about my father, who was killed in a motorcycle

accident last fall.

WBT: Yes, I remember that, and I am so sorry.

TB: He was of the Vietnam generation, and I grew up with stories of his time in the Army. For instance, he sent his 21st birthday on guard duty at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, marching through a hailstorm. Later, he graduated from the University of Georgia Law School and Army OCS at Fort Benning in the same year.

Fortunately, he was never sent to Vietnam, but the threat of war hovered over his entire early manhood, as it did over his entire generation's. He had so many friends who were impacted. One of his good friends, Sully, was a Green Beret in Vietnam, and I know my father was very moved by how the war has impacted his friend—the emotional and physical trauma. I think, as a burgeoning writer, you're maybe especially attuned to such stories or emotions.

What's more, 9/11 took place during a very formative time for me: when the towers fell, I was a freshman in college—nineteen years old—and I knew my generation was going to war. The military was never an option for me, as I was born with bilateral club feet, which have necessitated a multitude of reconstructive surgeries. but so many of my friends had to consider their involvement (or lack thereof).

Of course, 9/11 kicked off the GWoT, so our nation has been at war for most of my adult life. I think it's easy for the average civilian to forget that; after all, so little of the general population has "skin in the game" these days. But, as a writer, I think your job is not to be incognizant or unaware of such things, you know? I think your job, in some part, is to try and empathize with the experiences and traumas of others, to put yourself in their shoes (or boots).

WBT: Yes!

In a “Writer’s Bone” essay interview with Daniel Ford, you mentioned that you’ve written several stories based on old ballads, and that *Fallen Land* was inspired by an American ballad of Irish descent, “When First Unto This Country, A Stranger I Came” (Library of Congress Archives of American Folk Song #65A2). What is it about these ballads that speaks to you so strongly? Was there any particular music that inspired, or worked its way into, *Gods of Howl Mountain*?

And, as a fellow writer, I’m curious: Are you careful about the music you listen to when working intensely on a novel, the way some authors are careful about what they read? Do you have “sets” of music that have sort of accompanied each of your novels?

TB: Yes, as I mentioned before, I think Steve Earle’s “Copperhead Road” certainly influenced this book—it’s just a song that’s been big in my imagination since I was a kid. It’s a modern ballad, really, and I love how it juxtaposes outlaws from two different generations. Steve Earle’s “Johnny Come Lately” does much the same thing, exploring the vastly different homecomings of soldiers returning from WWII versus Vietnam.

WBT: I know that song! We had it on an old Farm Aid CD when I worked in rural political organizing. Steve Earle is a good guy – a big supporter of Farm Aid! And wow, that video really has the same feel as the opening of *Gods of Howl Mountain*. I can see how the tone of it worked its way into the novel.

TB: As for the old ballads like the one that inspired *Fallen Land*, I think there’s something so timeless and visceral about them. These were songs of the people, sung again and again and again, the verses evolving over the decades. I think of those ballads as survivors, really. It’s like natural selection—only

the strongest songs survive century after century, migrating from old countries to new ones, from mountains to prairies to coasts. There must be a nugget of truth or beauty or power in these old songs that just won't die, that continue to move our hearts and blood.

I'm fairly careful about what I listen to when I'm actually sitting there writing. Often, it's music that doesn't have lyrics, or else I can't understand the lyrics well—I don't want to have other words in my head. Rather, it's the mood or atmosphere of certain songs that seems to help. Also, there's music that helps with certain projects, but not while I'm actually writing. For instance, I've been working on something that relates to motorcycles, and I've been playing various renditions of my favorite song of all time—"Vincent Black Lightning 1952"—on repeat.

Not surprisingly, it's another modern ballad.

WBT: You are thirty-five, and *Gods of Howl Mountain* is your fourth book. This just might make you the Leonardo DiCaprio of fiction writing! What is it like to have published "early and often?" In Virginia Woolf's "Letter to a Young Poet," she famously writes, "For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty." How would you respond to Ms. Woolf?

TB: Ha, sometimes I feel a lot older on the inside than I look on the outside! To be honest, though, I only had a few short stories published before I was thirty. It may seem like an "overnight success," but I spent the large part of a decade working in near isolation, writing and throwing away two novels before *Fallen Land*, as well as tons and tons of short stories. I really didn't know another serious writer until I was around thirty years old.

I've heard that Virginia Woolf quote before, and, I don't know—I think that sometimes writers use it as an excuse. Looking back at my early stories, there are some cringe-worthy

moments, sure—and plenty of things I would do differently now—but I don't regret them. We only have so much time to express ourselves in this life, and early work shows us where we were then and how we've arrived where we are now. It's all part of the journey, I think.

WBT: I love that—"we only have so much time to express ourselves in this life."

This seems like a good time to ask if you have any advice for the even-younger poets (or fiction writers) out there, those who hope to make writing their life's work?

TB: I think Harry Crews said it best: "Get in the chair." There's really no secret but that. Desire, discipline, and force of will. And what did Calvin Coolidge say? "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence." I think that's as true of writing as it is for anything. It isn't going to be easy. You're going to get knocked down again and again and again. You're going to have to write through shitty jobs and shattering heartbreaks and rejections. But that makes you tough—not just with writing, but in life.

I hear young writers whine sometimes because they got rejected from the hippest new lit journal. Fuck that. In my book, rejections are badges of honor. Paper your walls with them. Each is proof that you kept writing despite all the forces trying to keep you from making your art, and every rejection is one step closer to the glorious moment of publication. Every rejection makes that moment sweeter. So keep your chin up and keep swinging, and remember your heroes went through these same battles. If they didn't, you might want to find new ones.

FOB by Daniel Ford

An excerpt of the debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!*

by Daniel Ford

Sid stepped into the desert surrounding the cramped forward operating base just as the sun surged over the distant mountaintop. He scratched his patchy, three-day-old beard. He inhaled deeply, the already warming air singeing his raw nostrils. The sand didn't crunch so much as slither away from the hot breath of desert wind.



Daniel Ford's debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!* is now available from 50/50 press.

He eyed the line of beige Humvees parked by sandbags piled waist-high. He strode over and climbed into the makeshift garage. Sid propped himself against the tall front tire of the closest vehicle. He stretched out his legs and crossed them, feeling the full weight of his still stiff boots on his ankle. He shifted his position just enough so he could awkwardly pull his notebook out of his back pocket. He stuck his pen behind his ear, sure the words that had been eluding him since the troubled descent through the mountain range would come before the afternoon sun boiled his internal organs. For now, Sid propped his head up against the hard, black rubber and tried to remember how he'd landed in this dusty valley.

Roger Ray's slamming door muffled the newsroom's buzz. So many conversations from which Sid had long ago felt disengaged continued in shouted whispers once Ray started howling in earnest.

"I'd be weakening my damn city desk in the middle of a mayoral election," the aging editor said. "On top of everything else, I'd be giving you, a little pissant, a promotion ahead of, frankly, a long line of more goddamn qualified reporters."

"Someone else can cover the Bronx borough president's philandering and embezzling," Sid said over Ray's incoherent grunting and molar grinding.

"Plus, I'd catch all kinds of holy fucking hell from the board..." Ray said. "Wait, what did you say?"

Sid patiently reached into his messenger bag and retrieved a blue folder that looked like an overstuffed jelly donut. He tossed it on Ray's desk and watched as he casually flipped it open. Ray rolled his eyes as he read the top sheet, but that hadn't stopped him from skimming the tax forms, illicit photos, and tawdry phone records bulging underneath.

"Sources?" Ray grunted.

"Waiting for a phone call from whomever you decide to assign the story."

Ray held Sid's gaze, hoping his young reporter would wear his self-satisfied grin just long enough for him to slap it off his face with a hefty Sunday newspaper.

"This doesn't change anything," Ray said, slamming his hand on the pile of front-page fodder. "I could just as easily order you to write this."

"I have a draft someone can polish if that helps," Sid said. "You don't even have to use my name. Actually, I'd prefer you didn't, I don't want to get banned from Harlem and its chicken

and waffles.”

“Listen, son...”

“I believe you owe me one,” Sid said, his jaw stiffening.

Ray waited a beat before nodding weakly. He got up, sat down on the edge of his desk, and put a hand on Sid’s shoulder.

“A desert warzone isn’t an appropriate place to overcome personal demons,” Ray said.

“That’s not what this is about,” Sid said. “I’ve just moved beyond writing about tainted politicians and transit complaints.”

“You better hope so. You survive our security training and I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can do.”

Sid took the deal and flew out to the Middle East three weeks later.

A sharp pain in his shin brought Sid back into the present. He cursed his luck, certain he’d been stung by a scorpion. However, the pain dulled quickly, but not before another kick to his boots forced him into a crouch. His eyes burned red as he opened them fully. He put his hand against the sun and made out a camouflaged hulk wielding a wrench standing in front of him.

“Scared the fucking piss out of me,” the soldier spat.

A tobacco-infused glob of spit now sparkled in the sand between the two men like a brushstroke of oil puddled in a Queens parking garage.

“Sorry,” Sid muttered.

“You’re not supposed to be here. I could have put a bullet in your fucking head. Probably give me a damn medal considering you’re a reporter.”

"I get it," Sid said. He brushed the sand off his pants as he stood. "I'm leaving."

"Don't be a pussy," the soldier said, extending his hand. "I'm Mason."

"Sid."

"Oh, I know your name. We get daily briefings on how to talk to you."

"Is that why no one has done it yet?"

"Fuck, easy killer," Mason said. "PR is not our strong suit."

"Funny considering that's part of your mission."

"Enjoying the heat while you're preaching at me?" Mason asked, slapping a wrench into his palm.

"Had to get out of the AC," Sid said. "Too small a space and too many closed windows."

"You want to open those bulletproof windows for the enemy, be my guest, but make damn sure me and my friends are all in the latrine when you do. And try not to make too much of a mess for us to sop up later."

"Yeah, well, never been a fan of central air. Messes with my sinuses."

"You been in a sandstorm yet?"

"No."

"Might change a few of your preconceived notions about our little air conditioned shit box."

"I didn't mean to offend anyone."

"Well, could you not offend anyone a few paces to your right. I've got to park my ass under the vehicle you've been using as

a hammock.”

“Right,” Sid said. “Yeah.”

He moved out of the way and heard Mason slide under the front bumper. Sid rubbed the back of his head.

“Something wrong?” Mason asked from beneath the vehicle.

“Can I help you with anything?” Sid asked.

“You know much about auto repair?”

“Not really, no.”

“Then I’m good.”

“Well, how about I just keep you company then?”

“Like to work alone.”

“This is the longest conversation I’ve had in days,” Sid said.
“Give me something.”

“I didn’t shoot you, what more do you want?”

“Son of a bitch,” Sid mumbled.

The clangs and grunts stopped. Mason wagged his boots back and forth.

“Coffee,” he said.

“Do you want anything—?”

“Black.”

“You got it.”

Sid headed back to the FOB. He found another hulking figure in fatigues leaning up against the counter, waiting for the coffee pot to finish gurgling.

“Lieutenant Núñez,” Sid said, keeping a respectful distance.

The officer growled something through his dark mustache that sounded like, “motherfucker.” Sid contemplated reaching for his notebook and peppering Núñez with questions before the man had even poured his morning coffee, but thought better of it.

“Given any thought to my, um, repeated requests?” Sid asked instead.

The officer’s severe, but sleepy, brown eyes motioned toward the coffee pot.

“Got it,” Sid said, grabbing two Styrofoam cups from the stack.

“Thirsty?” Núñez asked.

“Getting one for your mechanic.”

“Are you referring to Sergeant Ward?”

“This would be a lot easier if you didn’t break my balls every time we had a conversation.”

“But it wouldn’t be as fun,” Núñez said. He filled his mug and turned to walk out the door. “Don’t bother my men without my permission or I won’t talk to you at all.”

The officer knocked into Sid’s shoulder as he left.

“Sir?” Sid called out.

“You’re not ready to leave the wire,” Núñez said, pausing in the hallway. “Some of my men aren’t ready. Request denied.”

“Thanks for your time, Lieutenant...” Sid muttered.

He knew picking fights with commanding officers wouldn’t get him anywhere, but he hadn’t been raised to keep his mouth shut (or respect authority for that matter). However, Núñez had

just confirmed Sid's suspicions about the base's preparedness. What Sid couldn't piece together is whether that mattered in this country or not.

Sid returned to the Humvee and found Mason's boots pointing out the opposite end. Sid pounded his fist up against the bumper.

"Jesus H. Fuck!" Mason yelled out.

Sid heard tools thump against the sand.

"Delivery," he said. "I'm allowed to give you coffee, right?"

"Hell yes," Mason said.

After climbing out from the car's underbelly, Mason grabbed the cup and downed the coffee in one swallow. He tossed the cup back at Sid who caught it while preventing his own coffee from sloshing out.

"That must have felt good," Sid said.

"Nothing feels good here. Needed a jolt."

"Happy to help. Does this mean I can ask you a few questions?"

"Hope you're not looking to fill column inches with me," Mason said. "I'm a pretty boring story."

"Yeah, I figured that out pretty quick," Sid said. "But I'll take what I can get right now."

"What are you writing about?"

"Don't know yet."

"See, you want us to engage, yet you have no fucking clue what your plan is."

"I'm here, that is the plan. A lot of people have questions about what's going on over here."

"Tell you what, a lot of guys over here have a question or two on what's happening."

"Maybe we can learn from each other."

"When can I say I'm off the record?"

"Whenever you want."

"And you can't use what I say?"

"That's how it works."

"Then I'm off the record."

"Fine by me."

Sid leaned up against the door, burning his elbow on the hot metal handle. He pulled it away, more pissed about the squad's antipathy than by the glowing red blotch on his arm. Mason wiped his forehead with an oily rag and then got back to work.

Mason clamped his thick hand down on Sid's shaking leg.

"Really? Still with the fucking nerves?" Mason asked. "The mission is over, fucking relax."

Sid adjusted his helmet and nodded.

"Lieutenant, Bob Woodward here is still pissing himself," Mason yelled above the roar of the Humvee. "Any suggestions on how he can calm his delicate senses?"

In the passenger seat, Núñez turned his head slightly and growled something that sounded like "fucker."

"Well, I wouldn't do that to your mother," Mason said. "Just sit tight, we're almost home."

Sid had hounded Núñez for nearly a month to authorize his first patrol. The squad now fancied itself a crack staff, impervious to the anxiety and turmoil endemic to other

platoons across the desert. Outside of the occasional pop-pop-pop in the distance, however, none of the men crowded in the FOB had been in a firefight or had to halt a long caravan in order to investigate and detonate an IED. How would they react in the face of something more treacherous than cleaning out latrines or standing at attention for Reveille?

It turned out that Sid's hands refused to stop shaking the moment he parked his ass in the Humvee. They shook all through the meeting with the hard-eyed, sun-scorched elders of the nearby village. Núñez listened patiently to the staccato Arabic flying off the leader's rotten teeth like acid. He absorbed the overwhelmed translator's stuttering and backtracking while nodding and trying to maintain eye contact with his counterpart. Sid watched as younger, more anxious men prowled along the back of the tent, shouting and pointing every so often. They had been stripped of their arms before entering, but their danger still permeated the cramped space.

"What are they pissed about?" Sid had asked Mason.

"No water. Limited food. Enemy offering it all at discount prices," Mason had said. "It means we're fucked. Now shut up and keep close to me or anyone else with a gun."

Sid's concentration was broken by Mason leaping out of his seat and climbing on top of a snoozing soldier in the rear of the Humvee.

"I said move your hand, Bee," Mason shouted, slapping his subordinate on the cheeks.

"Wake the fuck up, this ain't fucking nap time."

"Sorry, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Up all night playing 'Call of Duty' again?" Mason asked.

"Nuh-uh, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Christ, just what Uncle Fucking Sam had in mind when he signed your sorry ass up," Mason said, retaking his seat. "Has more goddamn kills online than he does in real life. Put that in your article, Sanford."

"Why do they call you Bee?" Sid said, ignoring Mason's jabs to his bicep. "Hard to figure considering your nameplate reads Zdunczyk."

Bee glanced at Mason, who nodded his approval.

"Real name's Frank," Bee said.

"I'm aware," Sid said. "Why Bee?"

"Aw, tell him," Mason said, throwing in another scoop of tobacco below his bottom lip.

"My first day in the mess I wanted to make conversation," Bee said. "So I started talking about this article I read about bee hives being like a communist society. Then I started in on the similarities and differences between hives and military bases. Kind of explains it all."

"You're so fucking lucky 'Queen Bee' didn't stick," Mason said. "Whole squad was fucking howling so bad Núñez smoked the shit out of us. So worth it."

Sid reached the pocket of his flak jacket and pulled out his recorder. He waited for Mason's affirmative before turning it on.

"Why'd you sign up?" Sid asked.

"No one needs to hear that fucking story," Bee said, wearily looking at the slim device. "No offense, sir."

"This is your penance for conking out," Mason said. "Be thankful it's not fucking licking my boot whenever the fuck I tell you to."

"Yes, Sergeant," Bee said. "It all started when my father was murdered..."

"Murdered?" Sid asked, the quake in his hands now having less to do with nerves or the Humvee's shimmy.

"Yeah, couple of townies broke into our house looking for shit to pawn to buy meth or some shit," Bee said. "My dad went to investigate and they dropped him with one to the head before he could raise his pistol."

"Holy shit," Mason muttered, spitting tobacco juice into a cup. "Where were you?"

"Getting high in the woods with a bunch of fucks from school," Bee said. "We all passed out there. Cops ended up coming out to find me. We all scattered thinking they were going to bust us for weed. Ran home and right into the yellow caution tape like a goddamn marathon runner."

"They catch the bastards?" Sid asked. "I mean...did they apprehend the suspects?"

"Nah, this is the best part," Bee said. "They stepped over my dad and started ransacking the rest of the house. Probably looking for money or trying to cover their tracks. Make it look like there were more than two shit kickers. My mother had holed up in her closet and waited for them with a Remington 870 shotgun she bought on layaway from Walmart. Blew both motherfuckers away when they opened the door."

"My kind of woman," Mason said. "Shit, sorry about your Pops, but this is making my shit hard."

"So how'd that lead to you enlisting?" Sid asked, once again ignoring Mason.

"Despite being relieved, my mother was pissed as hell I wasn't home when it all went down," Bee said. "She told me that since she took care of my father's killers, the least I could do was

go shoot some towelheads in the desert. Sorry, is that too crass for a newspaper?"

"I'll clean it up, don't worry," Sid said. "You regret it?"

"Only regret I have is not killing those pricks myself. And not having a chance to kill anyone here. Fucking glad-handing political bullshit isn't my thing."

Sid nodded and pressed the pause button.

"Thank you for trusting me with your story," he said, extending his hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh, I don't trust you for shit," Bee said, shaking Sid's hand. "But Mason does and I report to him. I'm just as liable to shoot you next time you come near me."

"Understood," Sid said. "Just make sure Mason's behind me when you do it. Takes care of both our problems."

"You fucks know I'm still fucking here, right?" Mason asked.

The Humvee's breaks squealed like a downtown bus as the hulking transport swerved abruptly. Sid tumbled into Mason's lap just as the cup of dip flew out of the Sergeant's hands and onto Sid's chest.

Núñez shouted something unintelligible from the front of the vehicle.

"Shit," Mason said. "Look alive, fellas."

Sid's nerves actually calmed as the camouflaged men around him checked their weapons and reached for additional ammo. He heard a distant whistling that aggressively faded into dense thuds nearby.

"Fuck, we're in the shit now, boys," Mason said.

The Humvee shook after a mortar landed a few yards away,

spraying sand and debris across the small windows. The whistle intensified as the enemy's aim improved. Núñez's orders came out in a stream of profanity and pseudo-Spanish as he exited the front seat. Sid could feel the ripple of steel and sand as the Humvee continued to race across the desert. Mason shoved a finger into Sid's chest.

"What did I fucking tell you before?" He asked.

"Stay close," Sid said. "Preferably next to someone with a weapon."

"Good," Mason said. "Don't fucking forget it."

And then the world went white.

<https://www.amazon.com/Sid-Sanford-Lives-Daniel-Ford/dp/1947048104>

<http://www.writersbone.com/>



Daniel Ford

Daniel Ford is the author of Sid Sanford Lives! He's the co-founder of Writer's Bone, a literary podcast and website that champions aspiring and established authors. A Bristol, Conn., native (and longtime Queens, N.Y., transplant), Ford now lives in Boston with his fiancée Stephanie. He's currently working on a short story collection.

In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for

individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support “pre-emptive strikes” still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan’s sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush’s U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin’s Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community’s long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), “Generation War” follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to “Our Fathers, Our Mothers.” It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn’t fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany’s “Band of Brothers” is a dark anti-Epic that follows the

birth of modern
Germany through
the struggle of
those citizens who
were of fighting
age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very

unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as “camp guards.” But this isn’t a Ukrainian version of WWII—it’s *German*. Didn’t Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there’s always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it’s not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there’s always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it’s either his job, or he’s a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren’t clean, either, regardless of Poland’s experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18th century might return as a Russian during the season that

deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.

Such Modest Proposals, And So Many

Most schoolchildren in the English-speaking West read Jonathan Swift's [A Modest Proposal](#) in high school or college. Since its publication in 1729, *A Modest Proposal* has become a staple of English literature, the most recognizable satirical example of hyperbole. *A Modest Proposal* is often read by students of history, politics, and economics for similar reasons. It is a genre unto itself—the “modest proposal” essay—and is treated as such in many online media publications ([Salon](#), [Slate](#), [Jezebel](#), [TNR](#), [The National Review](#), and... well, all of them, irrespective of political alignment).

✘ John Swift, proposer of
modest proposals

(Wikipedia Commons)

For those people who missed Swift's original satire, here's a quick summary. In the early 18th century (really from the 17th-20th century), the Irish, colonized and exploited by England, suffered from extreme poverty. Meanwhile, a growing overseas empire and industrialization helped expand the British middle class, and drove appetite for consumer goods. Swift offers a solution to both issues—the middle class should cultivate an appetite for the flesh of Irish babies, which will alleviate the suffering of poor Irish families.

A Modest Proposal is not modest, nor is it sincere. Swift does not expect people reading it to take his argument at face value, though it is likely that he earnestly hoped his writing would help raise awareness and empathy for poor Irish civilians. The type of person (a person like Swift's fictional narrator) who would suggest developing a market for baby flesh—breaking humanity's taboo on cannibalism for sustenance, satisfaction, or profit—would be an immoral monster. But Swift's ambition isn't simply to shock with *A Modest Proposal*, he designs the essay to deliver horror logically, to examine a particular way of thinking about problem solving. The essay derives much of its power through fusing “thinkable” (the expansion of markets and generation of wealth as a way of alleviating human suffering) with “unthinkable” (that market expansion, in *A Modest Proposal*, is Irish babies).

Because *A Modest Proposal* communicates its point so effectively, it is widely emulated. A [favorite](#) of [New York Times Op-Ed columnists and contributors](#), (as well as [bloggers](#)) and many other media publications (as described earlier), the “Modest Proposal” of today is (unlike its inspiration), often quite modest in terms of its ambitions, and respect for the sensibilities of English-language readers. These [not-immodest contemporary proposals](#) have lost almost all connection to the original sense of Swift's intentionally outrageous essay, and

function simply as a way of grabbing readers' attention. They're a kind of bait-and-switch, where naming the essay in a way sure to draw parallels to Swift's essay serves as the "bait," and a justification for maintaining the status quo is the "switch."

✘ Writers propose modestly, today, when writing modest proposals

One (out of countless) example of a failed "modest proposal" directly inspired by Swift is [this](#) Obama-era 2010 think piece that whimsically offered to improve U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts by firing everyone in the CIA and replacing them with out-of-work investigative journalists. Elements shared with Swift's *Modest Proposal*: (1) offers to solve two social problems in one stroke, (2) is an unethical and bad idea, (3) clearly forwarded for rhetorical impact rather than as a serious suggestion. Elements it lacks: (1) offers some truly transgressive idea for the sake of exaggeration, amusement, and illustration [journalists are intelligence gatherers, and better at intelligence gathering than the CIA].

Even unconventional proposals (like Noam Chomsky's 2002 ["modest" proposal](#) that the U.S. arm Iran and let them attack Iraq) fall short of actually breaking taboo. In the case of Chomsky's satirical essay, a much worse thing happened than the invasion of Iraq by a U.S. supplied Iran—the U.S. invaded Iraq itself, destabilizing the area so completely that open warfare in Iraq is ongoing. In fact, Iran has contributed mightily in the struggle against ISIS, in terms of soldiers and material. Chomsky's vision for possible horror was totally insufficient for the satirical form, and is now a reality in Iraq.

The best or purest recent "modest proposal" to be found is tagged and searchable as a "modest proposal," but not explicitly titled as such. It is a Clinton-era essay from 1999

by David Plotz that proposes to end school shootings by [arming all schoolchildren](#). Plotz doesn't spend the time exploring the idea—how useful this would be for the gun industry, and (presumably) would assist the U.S. economy in ways that would create more prosperity, thereby reducing the type of family conditions that often lead to dissatisfaction, mental illness, and murder—but it's similar in tone and feel to Swift's satire. It's also pretty close to a stance [actually supported by the NRA](#) in the wake of Sandy Hook. Still, a decent attempt.

What's stopping writers and thinkers from going beyond Swift's rhetorical form? It's not as though the world is essentially more just or equitable than in Swift's time—on the contrary, knowing what we do about history, a compelling argument can be made that things are worse now than when Jonathan Swift was writing. Sure, there have been advances in technology and science. There have also been catastrophes on an almost-unimaginable scale, such that if one does not learn about them at school, one is inclined to believe that they are hoaxes. The Great Leap Forward, the Holocaust, Holodomor, the genocide of Native American populations in the Americas, the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons, and many other horrific tragedies of the industrial age required the invention of new [legal and ethical categories](#) for which Swift and his contemporaries did not have words.

Granted, Not Everyone is a Satirist

One possible reason so many authors and thinkers invoke *A Modest Proposal* without using the most powerful component of its energy (taboo-busting hyperbole) is that most writers don't consider themselves satirists. They don't write to satirize, they write (a column, for example) to advance a serious policy with serious people. In this case, serious

writers could be interested in referencing *A Modest Proposal* to show that they're well-read. They could also hope to use a portion of *A Modest Proposal's* energy to highlight the desirability of their position (which is not eating babies) while affiliating the competing argument with calamity.

Here's another factor to consider. Pundits and the political/media commentary class tend to come from the ranks of the wealthy, influential and powerful. This offers an incentive for employees of the wealthy and powerful (those working for Jeff Bezos at *The Washington Post* or [the Sulzberger family at The New York Times](#), for example) to be careful with what they write, and how they write it. One will find criticism of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* within their own pages, because those media institutions practice journalism (and do so well). Nevertheless, that criticism rarely takes on a *disrespectful* tone, or one that is strident or moralistic. There are limits.

The Sulzbergers are great patrons of the Democratic Party, and (an assessment based on regular readership of *The New York Times*) tend to pull for mainstream icons of the Democratic Party including the Clintons and the Kennedys—political families accustomed to chummy relationships with large media organizations. This is just one prominent example from an industry rife with patronage and nepotism, on both sides of the political spectrum. Nepotism and favor happens to be visible to many people who keep track of politics or consume journalism in a way that it isn't visible in physics or rocket science. Nepotism and favor are also differently useful in politics and journalism. When a political or authorial brand passes from one generation to the next, having a prominent father or mother who can parlay influence into access can make or break a young career in either. Is it any wonder that within two groups who depend on each other for power there tends to be little incentive to write hard-hitting satire that might undermine the position of either?

Social media also makes bold satire difficult by particularizing audiences, and opening satirists up to personal attacks (as well as the potential consequences of those attacks). Although satire is not supposed to care about being criticized, certain topics cannot be satirized without being criticized as [offensive](#). There is a higher standard for satire today, that takes more into account than an essay's subject (for example, the author's personal connection to the topic at hand). Besides, [media institutions](#) can be destroyed by the wealthy and powerful.

The final criticism of *A Modest Proposal* and similar satires could be that hyperbole as a rhetorical device has been overcome by the horrors of the 20th century. Satire, no matter how well-intentioned and effectively written has yet to prevent the worst human impulses. From this perspective, if satire isn't effective, maybe it's better not to write it.

But I'd tend to disagree with that idea. Here's an example I wrote of [a satirical piece](#) that emulates the intent behind Swift's argument in *A Modest Proposal* without imitating the structure. In this case, a man seeks to assuage his fears about terrorism, and in so doing, becomes a terrorist. As a matter of course, the piece (built as a how-to) describes terrorist activity. It's not great satire, but neither is it awful—and certainly on par with, say, most of what passes for satire in mainstream media today outside [Clickhole](#) and The Onion. If it were to go viral and be read by everyone in the U.S., would fewer people become terrorists? Maybe!

Or, to put that better—if it were good enough to go viral, it would almost certainly have a deterrent effect against domestic terrorism, because that's what great satire does, it makes bad but appealing ideas clichéd, it exposes the ephemerally attractive as flawed and stupid. [Anecdotal evidence](#) suggests that clever mockery can do more to make an argument against a given issue or idea stickier and more

effective than earnest straightforward appeals. [Common sense suggests the same.](#)

Ultimately, what does it matter if satire is ineffective or inefficient? Who said efficiency was the standard of value? Probably a British capitalist eating Irish babies.

Writers Invoking A *Modest Proposal* Should Be Less Modest

Without innovative, bold, confrontational writing, satire ends up excusing unethical or hypocritical behavior. It is satire's job to attack the status quo in those ways that the status quo has grown oppressive to humans—regardless of whether or not that attack is successful. Selectively, yes, and constructively, satirists and writers hoping to improve society must do so sometimes through offensive and/or provocative literature.

Absent real satire, the landscape for substantive discussion shrinks until it has been reduced to two agreeable gentlefolk bowing before one another, respectfully begging one another's pardon for being so bold as to ask whether the other might be willing to favor them by proceeding through yonder open door.

A Modest Proposal is not extreme, save in comparison with almost all of its recent published descendants. That there are fewer sincere satirical calls for evaluation in political, social, or economic terms at the same time that there are many essays pretending to do so is a commentary on the general comfort many well-educated people feel with the status quo. It's also a comment on how effective publishing has become at supporting writing that most people find satisfying. That's

almost as bad as a President Trump. And not quite as bad as raising Irish babies to feed the aesthetic tastes of the affluent.

Bryan Hurt: The Next Ambassador to France



Bryan Hurt, Author of *Everyone Wants to Be Ambassador to France*. Image Copyright Emma Powell

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."

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Acronyms and 21st Century Conflict

Some useful acronyms by which to understand 21st century conflict:

COIN: Counter Insurgency. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2003-2010. Broadly speaking, the strategy wherein a friendly force competes with an enemy force for the allegiance and support of a largely-neutral population. Unattractive to militaries because of the numerous paradoxes involved in successfully pursuing the strategy. Very attractive to democracies and advocates of human rights as, ideally, COIN involves pitting humanism and liberal, western ideas against some competing philosophy, and we'd rather believe that, properly marketed, our system will defeat any competing system.

CT: Counter Terror. Employed by ISAF in Afghanistan from 2010-present. Employed around the world by America. Championed most vocally by Vice President Joe Biden. The strategy wherein intelligence (gathered directly by humans or by technological means) identifies actual or potential terrorist threats to the U.S.A. or any of its allies (or strategic interests, including Russia and China), and that terrorist threat is neutralized. With a bomb or a gun. "Taken off the board." AKA "whack-a-mole" for its apparent ineffectiveness.

DEVGRU: Seal Team Six.

GWOT: Global War on Terror. The Bush Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that included OEF (the war in Afghanistan) and OIF (the war in Iraq). Intentionally imprecise.

GCO: Global Contingency Operations. The Obama Administration's term for the overarching foreign policy strategy that includes

OEF (the war in Afghanistan), and the unnamed operations in Africa, Pakistan, throughout South America and Europe and Southeast Asia. Terrifyingly, even broader and somehow more vague than GWOT.

ISAF: International Security Assistance Force. The group of mostly-NATO countries helping Afghanistan transition from tribal society into modern democracy. Also jokingly known as "I Saw Americans Fighting" among Scandinavian ISAF members.

OEF: Operation Enduring Freedom. The war in Afghanistan.

OIF: Operation Iraqi Freedom. The war in Iraq.

SOCOM: Special Operations Command (the command, now basically obsolete, responsible for organizing Delta, Rangers, Seals, and Special Forces).

TF -: Task Force [blank] – depending on the context, either a Battalion or Brigade-size effort, or a much smaller higher-echelon group of former SOCOM-affiliate soldiers performing deniable missions for which there are no names.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote [an essay](#) about the way politics was impacting the ways in which people used language. The basic idea was that unscrupulous people who had things to hide were manipulating how we communicated in order to deceive us into supporting people or policies that we would not otherwise want to support. That politicians lie was not a new idea in 1946, and is not surprising today. In a world with enough thermonuclear energy to destroy most life above cockroaches, though, the stakes are a great deal higher.

Orwell refined the ideas he expressed in 1946, and published them in a more broad fashion in 1984, when he described the language of "Newspeak." The language (a revision of English undertaken by a totalitarian state apparatus) would shift the way people thought by channeling their ability to express certain thoughts in public, the way they exchanged

information. Reading "Politics and the English Language" and 1984, it's not difficult to see how Orwell's ideas about thinking and language had evolved. Orwell believed strongly in the potential of democracy and humanism to create morally responsible, ethical, civic-minded individuals, and put his life on the line to that end in the Spanish Civil War, receiving a throat wound that kept him off the front lines of the Second World War.

One of the most important and relevant intellectual legacies that George Orwell bequeathed us was this idea that, either with or without malice, institutions routinely and *deliberately* attempt to shape public thought through language. Nowhere is that more apparent today than in the successive American Presidential Administrations responsible for beginning what we call the "Global War on Terror" (the Bush Administration) and expanding the definition and bureaucratic entrenchment of that war (the Obama Administration). Both Administrations make heavy, almost exclusive use of acronyms to describe every aspect of the conflict, from the weapons used, to the agencies involved, to the nature and scope of the military actions. Orwell would recognize the current "Global Contingency Operations" (GCO) as the apogee of post-modern "Newspeak" in action – a war that is made up of "contingency operations," less police action than police-intention, less of an effort and more of an idea. Something slippery, hopelessly slick, around which no counter-argument can be mustered.

The acronyms are constantly changing. When I got to Afghanistan, the Taliban were called "ACM," or "Anti-Coalition Militia." Eight months later, they became "AAF," or "Anti-Afghan Forces." A single fighter was a "MAM" or "Military-Aged Male," though many of the soldiers called them "FAGs," or "Fighting Aged Guys." As earlier pointed out, GWOT morphed into GCO sometime mid-2010. The CIA, with too much baggage, has lost much of its actual importance to various TFs, the NSA, DEA, DIA, and DHS, which in their turn will likely change

acronyms over the coming years.

The enemy carried AKs and PKMs and RPGs, while we carried M4s, AT4s, M240Bs, SAWs and M4-mounted 203s, which were later swapped out for 320s. HIMARS is good, but getting a GOMAR is bad, although one of the finest, most scrupulous officers I ever served with went on record saying that if you got out of combat without a CIB and a GOMAR, you hadn't done your job properly, a commentary on the higher-level leadership in the Army's unreliability and essential disconnect from events on the ground. One cannot understand the military without speaking its acronyms fluently—and each military branch has a separate set of acronyms, some so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

In short – to wage war on the side of justice and good (America, the west, humanism), one must first master a shifting language of words and acronyms which themselves change every few years or so. I can testify from personal experience that the effort involved in mastering that language is great, especially when one is actually in combat (and therefore not incentivized to do anything with one's energy save decipher the enemy's intentions). Mastering military-speak is the first step in confronting the realities of the war – one cannot effectively protest or criticize without understanding what it is one is protesting or criticizing. If one lacks the proper words by which to challenge a given political institution – especially when it is in the institution's interests to keep the nature of its goals and efforts obscure – one will simply rail away in a vacuum, doomed to appear to be protesting the last war, or some archaic problem that is irrelevant.

This is why the long-haired Vietnam-era protester seems so sad, so overmatched – he's saying “no war,” to which statement the Obama Administration can correctly say “we never declared war, but Iraq, which was begun on false premises by the Bush Administration, has been closed down,” and ignore the ongoing

engagement in Afghanistan, and the ubiquitous worldwide “Counter-Terror” operations targeting, among others, American citizens. College students and idealists who feel – correctly! – that we should be more careful about how much information we allow our government to collect have to sift through layers of obfuscation before they uncover an acronym – NSA? Not CIA, or DHS? – that gives them an entity, literally an *agency* against which to argue, with which to dispute.

And why, why does any of this matter? Because every political administration understands that if they were to place a new agency inside the Pentagon and advertise it by its true name – in the case of the NSA, for example, the “Office of Monitoring Everything Anyone Does Online to Profile and Preempt Terrorist Attacks,” there would presumably be a great deal of blowback. While some polls seem to indicate that a majority of Americans support sacrificing a certain amount of privacy to security, it’s not clear to me whether Americans would support such a program or agency – supposing that the majority of the population agrees that one should trump the other, we could have (given knowledge of the NSA’s programs) collectively agreed to discuss our way ahead as a nation. Even the CIA – the “Central Intelligence Agency,” which I will use as an umbrella acronym for those acronyms I should not divulge to the public in the interests of national security, could at this point more accurately be called the “CIA / DDSAT,” or Central Intelligence Agency / Department of Drone Strikes Against Terrorists.” Again, if the public had understood – understood, that we had kill teams in many third world countries, and were targeting individual human beings for assassination, oftentimes based on patterns of behavior, there probably would have been a spirited debate on the subject. These actions were *not kept secret*, but were buried beneath an avalanche of acronyms and double-speak. Newspeak, in fact.

One should not have to offer one’s credentials or explain one’s love of country when making such a statement, but it

still feels obligatory. In an intellectual atmosphere where substance is more important than words, I have to point out that I believe, like Orwell, so strongly in the potential for good in the west and our cultural tradition that I went to war, twice, for it – OEF VIII and OEF X (it may have been XI, I never got a clear answer on that). I believe that my country, a part of the cultural legacy of Kant and Plato, is an especially permissive and forgiving country in which to be a journalist and thinker, and despite the vitriol with which intellectuals are attacked from both the left and the right (the Williamsburg Hipsters on the one hand who see no wrong in President Obama, and the Fox News / Rush Limbaugh apologists on the right who see no wrong with anything the Neocons say or do), you can still live freer here than in any other large country of which I'm aware in the world. We can do better, though, as citizens – we should expect better from our government. Obfuscation and deceit are rife within our political community, and should be done away with. We must begin calling things by their true names again, and if we don't like how they look on paper – we need to be more responsible about how we exercise our global citizenship. On this, Orwell would agree.

Adrian B