

New Review from MaxieJane Frazier: “Mapping Fault Lines in Kate Schifani’s *Cartography*”



Kate Schifani’s memoir, *Cartography*, maps faulty practices and question of fault over her year serving in Iraq as an advisor and logistician to the Iraqi military. In her dangerous deployed experience, she excels in her ill-defined, nearly impossible advisory role while serving during the context of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repeal that personally affected her as a gay woman. The everyday events she details build to bigger questions about the U.S. role in the Middle East and our country’s culpability for its impact on Iraq.

Schifani’s gritty, no-bullshit narrative places her voice within the scope of widely varied war literature such as M.C. Armstrong’s *The Mysteries of Haditha*, Brian Turner’s *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Teresa Fazio’s *Fidelis*, and even Tim O’Brien’s classic novel *The Things They Carried*. A confident and unforgettable narrator, Schifani brings us down to the paperclips, dried-up Wite-Out, government pens, and the Saddam lighter in her desk drawer sketching the details of a convoluted conflict. *Cartography* leaves us grappling with the figurative (and sometimes literal) fragmented remains of the people the American military should have been protecting: Iraqi citizens acting as interpreters for the U.S. military; innocent Iraqis caught in the midst of this conflict; American servicemembers’ and their families’ lives disrupted by seemingly unnecessary deployment; the LGBTQ+ members of the armed forces, and more.

Cartography is a series of connected, chronological essays that highlight the *Catch-22*-esque absurdity of Schifani's experiences in Iraq which waver between outlandish cultural differences with her Iraqi counterparts to painful dissonance with her homophobic American peers. Keeping her sexual identity hidden in an inevitably misogynistic, hyper-sexual deployed environment leads readers to question if there is anywhere that this young Air Force captain does *not* face threats. The Air Force sends "a B-52 aircraft maintenance officer serving here as a logistician embedded with two dozen Green Berets" or as she puts it, "the least qualified person for this job" as an advisor to Iraqi military. She only mentions her career experience and barely highlights the possibility that these men will not listen to a young woman. Reading how she earns respect is one of the most satisfying aspects of this memoir.

We bump along early in the account through humorous stories of a forklift that turns only one direction and outdated Iraqi gym weight loss equipment that jiggles the user on a 1950s belt. Then she shifts us into more serious and heart-stopping moments as the humor behind her experience dissipates. The absurdity never changes. The worst of Schifani's many meetings with the Iraqis she advises happen in the middle of the night, and we are like a film audience begging characters not to check out a noise in a horror movie. But she unflinchingly performs her mission in the hours of darkness and pre-dawn hours, bumming rides when they lose transportation, and coming up with successes against all odds. She finds mattresses and air conditioners and all sorts of items the Iraqi military needs, even as the American people she works with marvel at her ingenuity. The tension in *Cartography* builds with such a subtle trajectory that we find ourselves longing for her tour to be finished, for her to leave this unpredictable and unwelcome deployed mission, because the bigger shoe feels constantly ready to drop.

Military readers will recognize the tightwire act Schifani negotiates of gender discrimination from all fronts during a deployment where she's making an impact and doing her job surrounded by men and hiding the fact she is gay. Already, only a few years after her experience, we're coming to believe things are better for women and for gay servicemembers. They probably aren't.

In a theme common with so many other women writing about the military, Schifani explores the sense of indoctrination into an outdated boys' club mentality. Military units, especially deployed units, flatten out individuality and make juvenile, worn out jokes about "no homo" and "your mother" along with a table-top, full-size poster "of a woman entirely naked except for a pair of shoes and a bandolier that sits between her obviously augmented breasts" unquestioned, common practices. Schifani's masterful dialogue is one of the best places we witness this smart, capable woman navigating the discrimination bombarding her from all sides. One exchange between an Army lieutenant colonel, embarrassed and unbudging, ends with her quiet victory, only marred by the overheard "Motherfucking air force cunt waltzes in here with some haji motherfucker and tells me how to fucking count." The stream of obscenity trailing down the hall after her feels as if it could sum up most capable young women's military experience. But we can tell Schifani shrugs off this and most of the rest of the hostility she faces. She saves her emotions for when they matter most.

Cartography wins us over in the details as if Schifani has drawn out a treasure map with dashed lines of her experiences drawing the relatively unscathed pathway through the landmines of her deployment. Still, we dread what we'll find when we reach "X" marks the spot. Yet, every time a sentence begins with "We shouldn't be allowed to," Schifani joins a chequered and popular lineage of military people doing what it takes to complete their mission while skirting around the more

restrictive rules. O'Brien's young soldiers giggle over tossing a smoke grenade between them and Fazio's deployed boyfriend cuts deals to obtain air conditioners from the logisticians, to name just a few instances. We know there is a long history of military stories about people shouldn't have done something, but they do it anyway. With Schifani, we learn it's a way of life.

Schifani becomes competent at something other than her Air Force trained career path and, though she wouldn't say it outright, damn good at her job in a way that constantly surprises her immediate superiors but that seems second nature to her. She makes the phone calls, listens in meetings, and comes up with "the goods" when everyone seems to expect her to ignore the requests. In a quiet way, she proves her gender and sexuality have nothing to do with her outstanding performance.

If the book is a map of experiences, the sense of place and movement is hard to follow in a reader's head, mostly because her deployed location was surely classified or adjacent to a classified compound. We drive off places with Schifani, but we're not always sure what is part of her compound, what is out in the unprotected space beyond the compound walls, and what locations are important to pay attention to. When she takes us to a partially built building as the narrative is coming to a close, we're not sure if it's in her compound. Knowing the layout and proximity of this scene is essential to the plot. At this building, her story abruptly ends. While Schifani could be enacting the sudden way the U.S. ended the mission at her location, readers might wonder what she means when she says in those final lines "I think I did this." How metaphorical is her intent?

Schifani's memoir is a vivid book that places readers in a combat zone for a glimpse of the mind-numbing dullness punctuated with moments of paralyzing fear, the circular nature of huge bureaucracy, and the thrill of life that wavers on and off a razor-sharp edge of uncertainty. In a palimpsest

of individual experience, she maps fault lines in the U.S. military Middle East involvement through the ingrained cultural narratives of misogyny from the American military and from the Iraqi people.

Cartography is a must-read to understand more about deployed military experiences. The unspoken questions are just as important as her richly rendered narrative—who lets this situation happen? Who allows both the Iraqi and American soldiers act toward this woman? Who thinks any of this is normal? And, finally, who is at fault?

Schifani offers a quiet and clear criticism of our role and influence in Iraq, questioning her own culpability for what happens in the country. As she might say herself, after her deployed experience there, *Insha'allah*.