

New Review from Matthew Komatsu: Adin Dobkin's 'Sprinting Through No-Man's Land'

I cannot separate my early memories of war from those of cycling. I'd just begun to cycle competitively – as a lieutenant and duathlete stationed in San Antonio – when I deployed to Afghanistan in the summer of 2002. And in the short several months I was stateside before deploying to Iraq 2003-2004, I spent much of my time in the saddle. In fact, I was run over by a San Antonio driver and violently ejected from my bike the week before I boarded my plane to Iraq. On the flip side of Iraq, I put in over 200 miles a week on the bike. As much as ten hours a week, post-war, often spent alone and silent. That's a lot of time to think.

*

I thought a lot about those days as I followed Adin Dobkin's nonfiction narrative along the 1919 Tour de France in his debut *Sprinting Through No Man's Land*. It was hard not fill the minds of the cyclists, many of whom fought in WWI, with thoughts of my own. But while I the cyclists of *Sprinting Through No Man's Land* spent close to half the race along a course that was altered because towns that had once been stage starts or finishes either no longer existed, or were so devastated that they could not support the logistical needs of the race and its competitors.

✘

The book begins, fittingly, in Paris in the Fall of 1918, mere days after the end of WWI. At the desk of Henri Desgrange, the editor of the sporting newspaper *l'Auto* and founder of the

Tour de France, we witness his decision to resume the Tour de France even as Armistice celebrations are erupting in the streets. From there, we're off to the races, if you'll forgive the turn of phrase, following a cast of characters as the Tour makes its way around the periphery of France.

To call Adin's cast "colorful" falls short. There's Desgrange – positioned as a kind of rigid omnipotent. The all-seeing, all-knowing, and ultimately all-powerful race director and mouthpiece of the race through *l'Auto*.. The racers: brothers Henri and Francis Pelissier, both veterans of WWI. The former, an underdog by his age; the latter, the younger brother still in his elder brother's shadow. Eugene Christophe, older than even Henri Pelissier. French veteran. Firmin Lambot, the Belgian who weathered WWI under German occupation. And others, of course.

The research that went into the writing of this book is exhaustive, and Adin takes great pains to show the reader the sourcing and methodology he used to develop the writing itself. He does a marvelous job of world-building, layering context in a chaptered structure that roughly matches the 15 stages (and gobsmacking 6,500km/4,000 miles covered during the 1919 Tour). He even went the extra mile, including three interesting vignettes regarding under-represented narratives that are connected geographically with where the reader is in the race at the time. In other words, I learned a great deal about WWI-era France.

Which leads me to my only quibble with the book, which has more to do with the baggage I brought to the reading than Adin's intentions for the book: this isn't your average armchair sports enthusiast paperback. Those books are predictable: event-driven, illustrated by flashes of character background, and largely high-velocity pacing. *Sprinting Through No Man's Land* is a careful book, slow and methodical, that takes great pains (as alluded to in Adin's afterword in which he addresses the pitfalls of narrative building) to

paint as full an understanding of the race as possible. In Adin's world, it would appear he's more concerned with telling the story of a time, than of a particular race and its characters. To do so, he spends a great deal of time providing the reader the story of the land in order for us to experience the race. So, don't come expecting chaptered race standings and attrition lists (the number of racers who quit before the race's end is breathtaking) because that's not Adin's story. And that's just fine because it's impossible to separate the 1919 Tour from WWI. The landscape, the racers, the people: WWI had changed *everything*. Countryside towns along the front had been reduced to rubble and roads thrashed by the years worth of passage of men and machine. Three previous victors had died in WWI. And the people themselves had been traumatized by the wartime experience, many of them displaced and grieving. So really, Adin's book is as complete a story of that time as he could make it.

As a former competitive cyclist, I found Adin's technical details refreshing. The Tour of today inherited the spirit of those Tours – the grueling distances, staged structure, and general classification scoring methodology and accompanying yellow jersey primary among them – but I doubt Desgrange or the Pelissier brothers, if popped into a time machine to see what their race would become in a century's time, would find much in common with today's Tour. Unlike today's professional cycling team structure, the teams then rallied under similar kinds of corporate banners, and remained amateur in nature. The teams of today serve to protect one most talented member of the team and his chances of winning the overall race. *Domestiques* – typically junior members – sole purpose in life is to create advantages for their captain, often find themselves breaking the headwinds for their captain, fetching water bottles and sustenance from the team's chase vehicle, and even giving up their bicycle should the captain's fail. In 1919, each rider was an island in Desgrange's amateur storm. If your bike broke, you had to stop and fix it yourself in,

say, a local blacksmith shop. And I do mean *yourself*. No spoilers, but there's a nail-biter of a scene in a late chapter that will have you counting seconds as a rider repairs his bike fork while the blacksmith simply observes. If a rider fell behind, other riders on his team were forbidden from falling back and pulling him forward lest they all risk time penalties from the ever-present eyes of Desgrange's armada of *l'Auto* journalists/race observers. Today's bicycles are technological marvels to the point that several years ago, professional cycling implemented minimum bicycle weights, and specified wheel types and bike frame geometries to reduce aerodynamic advantages. The bikes you see in the Tour today are a far cry from what Adin exposes us to: thick-tubed steel framed bikes with one-gear wheels that required a racer to dismount and manually change out to change gears. They were tanks to today's sports cars. And the clothing – my god – ask yourself how you'd feel about cycling 4,000 miles in wool, minus the luxury of padding under your ass.

*

Sprinting Through No Man's Land is a triumph of nonfiction storytelling, and it will be a welcome addition for the bookshelves of cycling fans and war literature aficionados alike (I'm both if you can't tell). Every page is a delight, unified by Adin's excellent prose and editorial choices, from the exit from and return to Paris, and it brought me back to my own post-war cycling in ways unexpected and refreshing. My recommendation: turn on this year's Tour. Read a chapter at the end of every stage, and let Adin build that world for you in ways that simply watching it never could.

Allez!

*

Dobkin, Adin. [*Sprinting Through No-Man's Land: Endurance, Tragedy, and Rebirth in the 1919 Tour de France.*](#)

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher's 'Empire City'

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it's the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* I've had for nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

"Superheroes? Really?"

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO's critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore's graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Netflix's superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon's remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher's second novel, *Empire City*, has sauntered.



[Empire City](#) is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying

attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a “Council of Victors” would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire “Cythrax” bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves “the Volunteers” in a nod to our world’s all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in “Empire City” and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher’s three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend’s question earlier this year: it’s not about the abilities. OK, I’ll revise that statement: it’s not *just* about the abilities. The superhero phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea,

they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military. The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public

figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood*, and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.