

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air

Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka “Charlie Sherpa,” is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories*. Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:



Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation

When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund

others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by

Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between*, has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses*, of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront*, lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment*.

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi*, by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope...compelling...An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen

readers.”

And of course we’ve published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson’s memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones’s short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson’s debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon’s collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI*.

What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel resources allow, but we’ve also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can’t say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they’re profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I’ve been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict

resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence*, a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing*, by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.



Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand “how-to” newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn’t public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers’ off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn’t know what to tell him.

There weren’t any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym “Charlie Sherpa.” The exercise was equal parts “learn by doing” and “ask forgiveness, not permission.” People still call me “Sherpa,” particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It

also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a “micro-press”—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between “military” and “midwest”? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are “heroes.” Neither are all veterans “broken.” Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the

work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I’ve often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it “lessons-learned integration.” In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*.

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we’ve serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting “21st century war poetry.” Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we’re not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between “military” and “civilian” audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-

experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about \$12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even, and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War

Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You Were*—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle (www.aimingcircle.com), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way,

build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Middle West Press: <http://www.middlewestpress.com/>

MilSpeak Foundation: <https://milspeakfoundation.org/>

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.

New Fiction from M.C. Armstrong: Excerpt from Novel 'American Delphi'

Note: M.C. Armstrong's new novel, 'American Delphi,' will be out October 15, 2022 from Milspeak Books. It has been hailed as "riveting, wise, and wonderful." Please feel free to [pre-order here](#), or purchase wherever books are sold.

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From 'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong

"How do you tell the world that your brother is a psychopath?"

"You don't," my mom said. "Get away from the screen and journal about it."

She took this black and white notebook out of her grocery bag and handed it to me like it was supposed to be the answer to all of my problems. So here I sit, notebook and pen in hand, being a good girl while Zach is standing in the kitchen literally jumping up and down about how the world is ending and how America has more cases of the virus than any other country on the planet and how he saw a video of somebody fall off a motor scooter in Indonesia and watched the guy's face go black before vomiting blood and dying right there by his scooter and you would think, by listening to my brother describe the story, that he was talking about a corgi or some Australian getting playfully punched by a kangaroo on YouTube. But this is somebody dying and for Zach it's like the best thing that's ever happened. It's like it's confirming all of his theories about apocalypse and totally justifying all of the whips, knives, guns, and fireworks he's been collecting in the closet of his crazy-ass bedroom upstairs.

"Buck says the virus is the medicine," Zach said, getting up in my face and breathing his hot breath all over me.

Buck London is Zach's special friend. Buck's an old man who just moved into Orchard Chase and smells like mothballs, and I can tell from Zach's smell that he's been spending way too much time with Buck.

"Get away from me," I said. "You're not practicing social distancing."

"We are the virus," Zach said.

"You are the virus," I said.

"Nobody is the virus," mom said, tossing a salad with a bunch of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and falafel (feel awful). Mom said we should use the plague as an excuse to go

vegan, but there goes Zach behind her back, just standing, smiling at me as he's shoving disks of salami into his mouth. It's like he's proving this psychopathic suicidal point by eating meat while mom is making a salad, and I said: "NINA!" because I call Mom by her name when she won't listen. But by the time Nina turns around, Zach's pretending like he's tying his shoe and I'm taking a picture of this journal just in case he kills someone someday.

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Mom said her biggest fear is that I end up a "twentysomething grandma" like Tanya Purtlebaugh. Mom's entire life seems organized around making sure that I don't end up like Mrs. Purtlebaugh, but I said "seems" because Nicole, Tanya's daughter, did just have a baby at seventeen and Nicole's two years older than I am and her mother is exactly seventeen years older than Tanya which makes her mother thirty-four and that's only three years younger than Mom which, if you do the math (which I do), it's pretty clear: Tanya Purtlebaugh is not a "twentysomething grandma." In other words, Mom's entire mission in life right now (and she's succeeding) is keeping me from having sex so I don't basically have a ME which, if you think about it (and I do), is really sad and it makes sense why she lies and covers up by blaming it all on a "twentysomething grandma" who's not actually a twentysomething grandma.

Mom doesn't want me to see what she calls "the elephant in the room": Her biggest fear is actually another ME. I am the elephant. Mom is afraid she's like the virus and has passed on all her bad decision-making to me and when I told her, in the fall, that I didn't want to play tennis in the spring or take any "private lessons" with Pastor Gary, she flipped out because she basically wanted to ensure that I was constantly quarantined in clubs and sports and stupid boring activities where I was sweating and bickering with other girls instead of having "idle time" with boys, but look at everything now. What

happened to the tennis team? Same thing that happened to track, soccer, drama, ballet, baseball, archery, karate, and everything else—canceled.

Everyone's in their room by themselves except Nicole with her screaming mixed-race baby, but guess who's used to being alone? The elephant in the room, that's who.

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"This is like a taste of being old," Mom said as we drove to the grocery store, Zach riding shotgun, me in the back.

"Nina," Zach said. "Please tell us exactly what you mean because I wasn't listening."

"Okay, Zachary," Mom said. "I mean this is what we've been looking forward to all day, isn't it? Our one chance to get out of the house, where nothing is happening, just so we can listen to some music in the car and see a few people at a store. Think about how many old people don't have soccer practice, piano, or archery."

I'll give Nina credit: she made me see things differently for a second. There was an old black woman covered in a clear plastic bag in the produce section picking through apples really slowly, and I felt bad because the one place where this old woman gets to go is now invaded with danger, and we are the danger, and I wonder how long until she gives up and has some granddaughter teach her over the phone how to have groceries delivered to her front door by a drone?

"Off your phone!" Mom said to Zach as we passed by the meat shelves which were picked totally clean of everything except the meatless meats. So much for America using this crisis to wean itself off fossil fuels and diseased beef.

"Look!" Zach said.

Passing by a little mirror near the cheap sunglasses, I saw my

stupid, long witchy nose. I hate my nose.

“Look!” Zach said.

“Look at what?” I said.

I put my palm up to my nose as if to smash it back into my head. We wheeled past the glasses and down the coffee aisle so Mom could get her “medicine” when Zach showed me a picture from MIMI of the socially distanced sleep-slots for the homeless of Las Vegas, a parking lot that had basically been turned into a dystopian slumber party for all these Black Americans who live in this city with a hundred thousand empty hotel rooms. But because we are America, we force the poor people to sleep in a parking lot, and there was this woman in a white hijab or bonnet standing over the homeless like she was some kind of monitor to make sure the poor were keeping their distance. Or who knows? Maybe she was nice and asking them if they were okay, or if they wanted soup. What was not okay was the way psychopath Zach was grinning as he was thrusting the screen in my face.

“Why are you smiling?” I said.

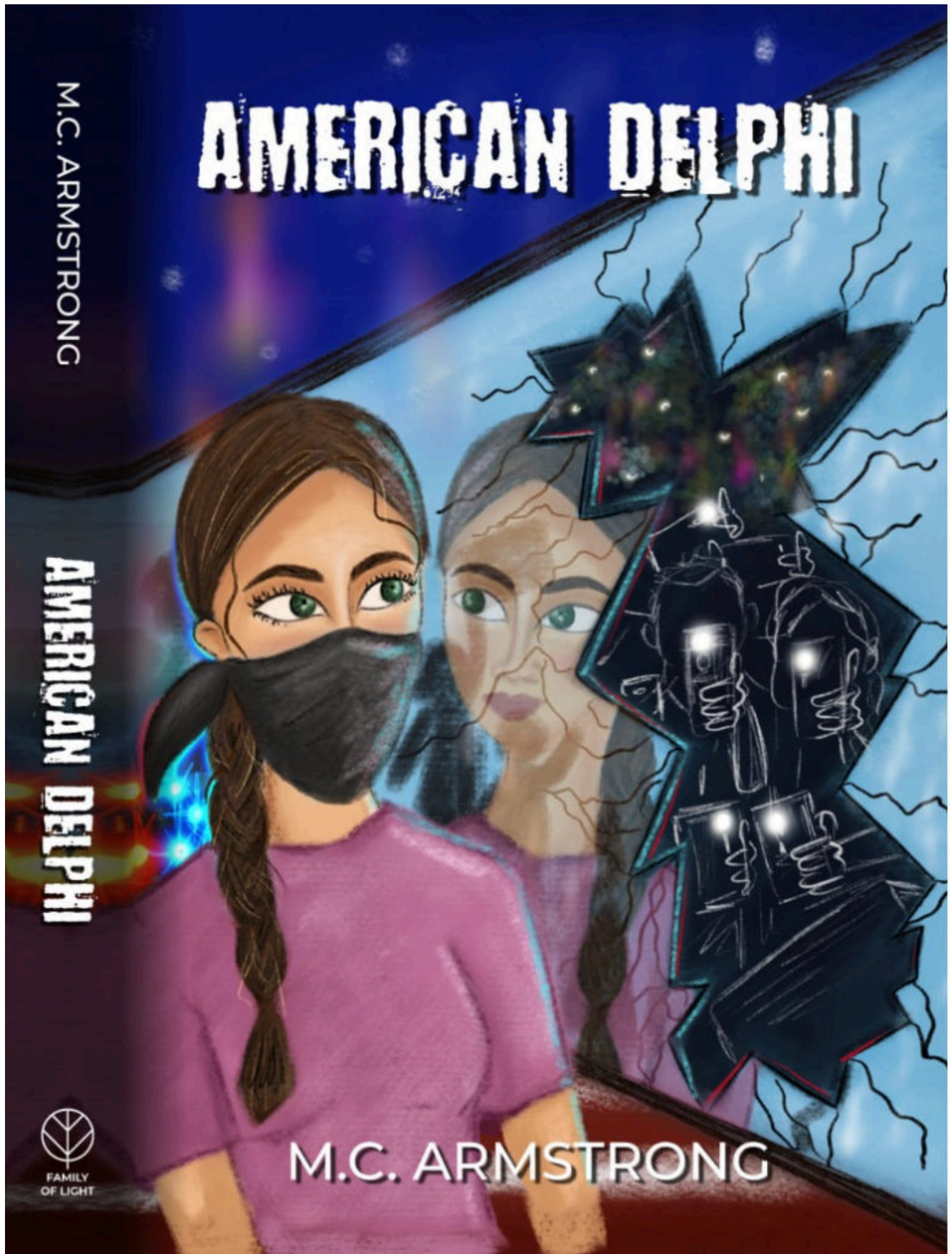
“He’s smiling because he’s alive,” Mom said, sweeping three bags of Ethiopian coffee into our loaded cart, and Mom’s answer would have been totally perfect if it weren’t for one thing: IT’S HER ANSWER. NOT HIS! MY BROTHER IS SICK!!!

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I have a wasp in my room because my window won’t seal. But a wasp is just a bee, so his brain is as big as a flea, which means he won’t fly through the crack, and there’s a yellow jacket on the other side of the window, and he’s just a bigger bee, so he’s dumb too. He doesn’t know he just has to fly in the little slit if he wants to see his friend or fly a little higher to show his friend where the opening is so he’ll stop going crazy and bouncing off the walls. Instead, the yellow

jacket just hovers and buzzes while the wasp goes nuts and it's actually kind of funny. I think the yellow jacket is pretty much watching TV, and the wasp is his show for the night, and I guess I am, too, and it's like the birds have stopped quarreling and are now laughing like a sitcom audience, like the birds know everything.

What do the trees know?



'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong, October 2022. Cover art by Halah Ziad. Milspeak Books.

There goes my brother running through the grass. Wonder where

the psychopath is going with his big backpack. It's like a scene from a movie. The psychopath with his backpack loaded with knives and fireworks walking through this totally dystopian, suburban wasteland of saggy porches and American flags towards this half-moon that looks like a lemon wedge while Toast, the Kagels' new corgador, rams up against the invisible fence with his special red cowboy bandanna around his neck, and how can I tell my brother's a psychopath, you might ask? God. Just look at him baiting Toast by charging the invisible fence. You can totally tell Zach loves electrocuting Toast, and you know what they say about boys who are cruel to animals. Zach is totally toasting Toast so I open up my window and scream at him to stop and when I close it back up the wasp is gone.

Mom's right. This is what it must be like to get old. I have to take my sunset walk and "get my steps in." I walked by Aria's house and then the Kagels. I called Toast to the edge but I didn't taunt him like Zach. We just sort of looked at each other, mirroring one another. Toast blinked. I blinked. Toast tilted his head. I tilted my head. Toast looked right. I looked left. Then I noticed at my feet some magenta letters. Maybe they were mauve. I don't know. The words on the sidewalk were written in this pinkish chalk and it wasn't the first time I'd seen the graffiti. For the last two weeks the parents of all the little kids have been outside drawing pictures of daisies and birds and smiley sunshine faces with their kids, and Zach and I are too old for that, but some of the older kids have been using the chalk to say other things or to mark their times on their bike races since they're being forced to exercise outside for the first time in their lives and they're actually having fun with it, but this graffiti wasn't like that.

This was different:

Go Vegan.

I walked a little farther and read in yellow:

Media Lies.

A little farther in blue:

Big Pharma Kills.

A little farther in red, white, and blue:

Government Lies.

And then in white:

Black Lives Matter.

And after that it was back to magenta:

The Truth is a Virus. The Truth Leaks. Spread Truth.

And I was like, okay. How do you do that?

How do you spread truth?

I kept walking. Now, in purple, but with the same handwriting, they said *We Need Change*. And I'm like, okay. Duh. But then, near the turnoff from Cedar to Byrd—right where you could see this big stack of logs against the side of Buck London's house—there was one more phrase before I turned around and it said: *American Delphi*.

I was pretty much across the street from Buck's, staring at this dark green holly bush he has in front of his house and this stuffed armadillo everyone can see on the chipped paint planks of his porch, but because of the huge prickly holly bush, you can't really see anything else. I couldn't tell if he was sitting on his porch in his underwear smoking a cigar with a one-eyed cat in his lap, or if he was inside on his couch looking at naked pictures of girls. I have no idea why Zach spends so much time with Buck, and I have no idea what *American Delphi* means.

But I am going to find out.