

New Review by Maggie Gamberton: Nancy Stroer's *Playing Army*



A Game of Soldiers – A Review of [*Playing Army*](#) by Nancy Stroer

LT Minerva Mills is a hot mess. Literally. We meet her with 'sweat pooling in her waistband' as her mother rams through a terminally inappropriate 'Pink Tea' at Minerva's first assumption of command ceremony at Fort Stewart, aka 'Camp Swampy,' Georgia, on a hot summer day in the mid-1990s. Mrs. Mills has fallen out of step with the times, the people, the weather, Army tradition, and her daughter's need to project authority in a time and a place where Minerva had inherited none.

As the daughter of a Viet Nam MIA, Minerva has been an outsider to the 'Army Family' her whole life. She makes an unlikely protagonist – she eats too much, she drinks too much, she weighs too much, she struggles to control both herself and the people in her command. In other words, she's totally relatable. She struggles to assemble the self-protective camouflage needed to help her straddle the insider/outsider divide which she must overcome if she is to succeed in command and in achieving her grail quest – understanding what happened to her father. Expert at Army field navigation, Minerva struggles with navigating human interaction among her superiors, her subordinates, and her equals. The novel takes us through physical and psychological terrain which challenges Minerva at every step.

It is rare to find women who write knowledgeably and skillfully about the US Army, and even more rare to find women as active military protagonists in gendered narratives of war

outside the extensive military romance industry. In our current historical moment of mythical, *Playing Army* provides a welcome examination of the interior life of warrior women. Military women survive in the dominant masculine military culture by playing their cards very close to their chests. Those who have mastered the art of saying little and observing others closely rarely come out from behind their impassive masks to reveal the thoughts that they've learned to hide so well.

The clear, dry, acerbic interior voices of women who crave power, who search for meaning, who seek service tell their stories here. Their stories adeptly illustrate the uses of silence as a weapon and a defence among women in the US military. The novel also charts the Venn diagram of personal commitment and resistance which embroils all participants in closed systems such as the US military, but particularly those at the intersections of marginalisation. In addition to LT Mills, the novel explores briefly the interior worlds of two competitor peers – LT Logan, the golden child of a US soldier and a Vietnamese mother, and First Sergeant St. John, black, lean, an exemplar of Army ethos. These warrior women are observed and drawn with precision and clarity, a deep sympathy for their situations, and a generous acknowledgement of their significant strengths.

Playing Army explores the structure of power through the micro-aggressions in a hierarchy founded on the management of violence. The neglected military narrative field of logistics, maintenance, and personnel takes center ground, mapping the tails that wag the dog. The change of focus from stereotypical US military blood combat narratives is both welcome and overdue. The keenly observed ground truths of the unglorious majority challenges the myth of that the 'real' Army exists only in and for combat. This optic brings into focus the dark play and unglorious realities of the 'real' Army for the majority of Army personnel.

Playing Army is skillfully crafted, satisfying in its resolution of LT Mill's journey learning to be serve well as an Army officer, and tantalising, in that it leaves us with unresolved questions. The child of a soldier father who neither knew nor wanted her, why was she named 'Minerva' by her mother? Why has clear-sighted Minerva chosen to 'Min'imise herself? The vignettes centered on LT Logan and First Sergeant St. John are both compelling and brief, inviting follow-on novels.

I hope Nancy takes them up on their offers of further stories to be told. Having hosted these complicated women with compelling narratives in my reading room, I find myself hoping to be invited inside their lives and thoughts again.

New Fiction from Nancy Stroer: "Move Out"

I drum the steering wheel of the rental car with the flats of my palms. It's the opening riff of a song by Yaz. It takes three notes, four—that blossoming into a fanfare of electronic horns, and I'm a teenager in the 80s driving these same roads in Ingrid's crap Toyota, bellowing along.

"Don't make a sound, move out," I serenade the interior of the rental car. I stop. No one moves out without some battle-rattle, no matter how much duct tape they've applied to their loose parts. With soldiers, who the uninitiated think of as following orders without hesitation, news of moving out is often accompanied by a fair amount of bitching and moaning. It's human nature to resist change, even good change. Inevitable change.

I picture myself as a nineteenth century woman, children clinging to my long skirts. My husband has just returned from the saloon where he's swapped lukewarm beers with a prospector recently returned from California. "We're goin' West," my husband announces, gold dust sparkling in his eyes.

"Men!" I grunt to the womenfolk over our respective washtubs later. "Are not the rational sex!" Even as the other women snort in agreement, though, I am picturing *myself* astride a horse, leading a wagon train, encountering endless prairies, mountain vistas, cultures unknown. I'd be sweaty, sure. I'd be worrying about the kids' educations and about snakes camouflaged against their basking rocks. Nonetheless, I allow myself a frisson of excitement.

Had it been common in nineteenth century white America—or anywhere, anytime, really—for the woman to be the one who badgered her husband to pick up and go? To keep moving, moving? This was true for me, so it must have been true for others.

What happened to those people—women or men—when they finally ran out of road?

When, after years of maneuvering around the planet, the road finally ended or worse—they landed back where they started, like I had? I'd tried to stay ahead of this day. If I moved far enough, fast enough, I thought I could outrun it. For thirty years my husband and I had always managed to wrangle one more job overseas—but not this time, and probably never again. My husband jokes about the heel marks I gouged into the floor of Heathrow Airport as he dragged me across it for the last time.

Rental cars are like modern day covered wagons, I tell myself as I drive. I love the snug, Little House on the Prairie feel of them—pristine, reliable. Chock-full of everything you need. Adventure awaits! But the built-in sat nav on this one is

getting on my nerves. I learned how to navigate the old-fashioned way, in the Army. By wandering, map in hand. Boots on the ground. Even when I was a teenager, we picked unfamiliar roads and drove wherever they took us. There was nothing for teenagers to do but drive, nothing to look at but kudzu pulling down power lines and old porches. But that habit of open-ended exploration has stood me in good stead over the years. Nowadays people are at the mercy of cars and phones and satellites that tell them what to do, where to go, what to listen to. In the olden days we drove endlessly, listening to music. We prided ourselves on discovering new music and mixed cassette tapes ourselves, glued to WUOG if you were trying to bag the latest indie band, or to 96 Rock in Atlanta, waiting for that pregnant pause between DJ prattle and the beginning of our favorite songs so we could pounce on the record button. There are hundreds of channels on this radio, or whatever you call it, feeding me nothing but the songs it thinks I want to hear. Delayed gratification, always a scarce commodity in America, this land of plenty, is a complete goner.

When I realize I'm enjoying song after song with never a moment of dissonance, I search for the off button. I find it, eventually, on the steering wheel. This car is taking me backwards, not forwards. Its fancy time machine runs in reverse and that is not where I want to go.

I know cars, for crying out loud. I was a maintenance officer. But in England I live-lived! Shit!—two blocks from the doctors' office, two blocks the other way to the dentist. The kids walked out the back gate to their schools, joining the mass migration of other children, parents and grandparents and strollers, dogs on leashes, boyfriends and girlfriends tethered to each other, tethered to their devices, but walking—to the supermarket, to cafes and restaurants and pubs. To church if I wanted to, which I didn't. But I could.

I walked in Turkey. I walked and rode my bike in Germany. In Japan I rode my bike to work, frogs leaping like synchronized

swimmers into the rice paddies as my front wheel shushed them out of the way. People in suits sweeping in front of their businesses as a team—everyone clearing a gentle path for the day to follow.

But here people get in their cars to drive two blocks. They have to—there aren't any sidewalks, no bike paths, no walking trails. They roll their windows up to keep the climate inside their cars perfectly adjusted to their exacting specifications. Never a bug or a bead of sweat allowed. No careful curl blown by the wind. All safe and certain, which is nice but also the gateway to complacency.

“You couldn't just stay in England?” My extended family is happy to have me back on American soil but they know me. They worry about me. They have this westward ho idea of me, that all the world is mine and I can go where I want and do what I want for as long as I want. They don't know the complexity of visas and immigration, or that it might not be moral to think of other countries as unconquered territory. When I try to explain that exploration opens minds, their kind faces remind me that experiences are always filtered through default settings—settings that usually have to be adjusted back at the factory. I do not want to be reminded of this. I am even more perplexed than they are, and also angry, that I could not just stay in England.

Unfortunately, I also like my husband. The wagon train wouldn't be the same without him singing nonsense songs to pass the time and cooking up a mess of beans at the end of the day. We've spent hours with the real estate agent this week but now he's back at the generic hotel, drinking a beer that's trying too hard to be something it's not—beer with grapefruit essence? what the hell?—and watching home and garden shows while I look at more houses. He doesn't argue that I should just pick one perfectly fine house and be happy. He knows me, too. He knows I need to go see one more, then one more after that, and as many more as I need until I'm utterly exhausted.

What if God was one of us? asks a road sign.

Sanctuary of Jesus Christ of Jefferson Road, two miles.

Fresh Peaches!

Fresh peaches and sanctuary at the same roadside stand? I'm cross-eyed from the monotony of three house models per curated subdivision, carved out of the unspoiled open areas of my youth. Kute kountry kitchens opening onto family rooms. Family rooms opening onto treated redwood decks, overlooking other redwood decks. Every mile unfurling a growing dread that I will never find a home to return to in this state of my birth.

The Day of the Lord is coming! Are you ready?

Hell is hotter than summer in Georgia!

Best Price for Firewood! One by one, the signs mark the approach of either outcome—pull over, or don't pull over and suffer the consequences. I've just looked at the last house on my list and have nowhere else to go, so I pull over.

The rest stop isn't more than a collection of sheds and gravel but I know it from the free-standing marquee that announces, *Prepare thy chariot and get thee down.* Mine's the only chariot pulling in. I don't want church, even if it's the only unique thing, the only structure I find with any character, for miles. At their core, all world religions are the same, and pretty good. In practice I find them suffocating. Controlling in unique ways. On the other hand, a real Georgia peach straight from the orchard is not something you can get just anywhere. A pure, good thing. I get myself down from my chariot and head for the produce stall, squinting against the sun. Besides the peaches there are tomatoes, cantaloupe and sweet corn, a dollar an ear. Jars of preserves and honey and piccalilli for considerably more than a dollar. I want all of it but they only take cash. That, at least, is like Europe and Asia. I open my wallet as the sleepy teenager weighs out some

peaches and I ask, "Which one's the church?"



He points to the largest shed, which has a cross over the doorway, a couple of two-by-fours nailed at right angles. In England, a cathedral soars—soared—over our town. It squatted on medieval haunches over a crypt from Anglo-Saxon times. The windows glowed as darkness fell, as the organ and the choir celebrated Evensong. On Friday afternoons in Ankara the men left me in their shops—utterly alone and surrounded by carpets and ceramics and gold—and went to wash their feet as the muezzins called them to prayer. Next to our house in Misawa, the old farmers, themselves bent at right angles from a lifetime of planting rice, kept company with the millet gods at the tiny kibi jinja tucked into the woods. I never had the slightest urge to join any of them, but none of these neighborhood protectors were faking it. Their actions were authentic to them.

My eyes take a second to transition from blazing sun into the dim of the shed and when they do I see a man sitting on a metal folding chair at the end of the room, otherwise empty except for a stack of other folding chairs, and a kiddie pool in the corner. A shaft of sunlight comes through a gap in the roof and beams directly onto his bowed head.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do—clap to awaken the gods? Bless myself with water from the pool? But he looks up just then and says, "You ought to wash those peaches first. The fuzz can be unpleasant."

"Yes, sir," I say. I wonder how he knows what's in the paper sack. "Is there a hose somewhere?"

He nods towards the pool. "You can use the baptismal font."

"Business a little slow during the week, I guess." It feels strange but also sanctifying, washing peaches in a blue

plastic oval with cartoon mermaids swimming on the bottom. The comedian Eddy Izzard has a bit where she compares the Church of England to fundamentalist religions. "Cake-or death?!" the church ladies threaten, while forcing a cup of tea on people after Sunday services. Cake or death. Cake or death. Is this glorified shed for real, or just an idea it has about itself as so much of America seems to be? I want to feel it in my heart but will run at the first sign that I've been lured there by peaches, only to be ambushed by proselytizers. Georgia is full of realness, and also full of traps. This has never changed.

My husband and I have seen the bylaws of Homeowners' Associations this week, page after page of requirements for what can and cannot be planted in your own front yard. I picture the garbage cans along a German street on pickup morning, each precisely aligned with the others. Japanese rock gardens; bonsai trees tightly bound by tradition. All enforcements of ideas, all of which made me claustrophobic. In contrast: the kapıcı of our apartment building in Ankara mowed straight across the rose bushes with an electric hedge trimmer, laughing and joking with the kapıcıs from other buildings up and down the street, as they first maimed and then watered their own rose bushes from garden hoses, splashing water on the leaves with no care whatsoever that they'd be scorched in the relentless sun. Was that the inşallah approach to gardening or just carelessness?

How does a person find a true place in this joint? And by joint I mean the entire planet. There are so many rules, some of them good but never all of them in the same place at the same time. And oh, how I'd cried at the sight of those orderly ranks of garbage cans every week, even as they irritated the shit out of me, as the day of our departure from Germany approached. I wanted to get out of the car and shove them all off the perpendicular, mess them up. I'd gone to Germany as a young soldier; I left as a young married woman. So much had

changed during those eight years, so it wasn't that I couldn't handle change. I could. I was black belt qualified at rolling with the changes. And Germans drove me crazy with their incessant pressure to conform. They were interested in Americans, at least, bless their scarred, soul-searching hearts, but because I looked like a stereotypical German, I guess, they wanted to bind me with all the Regeln, spoken and unspoken. In Japan and Turkey there was no chance of being mistaken for a native, and therefore, we could fuck up with more or less impunity but would never fit in. There were different rules for foreigners. In England, we might have looked like we belonged but it was made clear to us, in large ways and small and non-stop even after fifteen years of hearing the question, "How long will you be here?" that the asker wanted to know when the door would finally be hitting us on the asses on the way out. Whether they should bother to speak to us at all after the end of the conversation.

Americans, the nomadic (colonial) types, the military types (come to conquer or occupy) were the best I'd ever met at forging tight personal bonds—that were then raggedly severed as they rotated to their next duty stations. No one ever said a definitive goodbye. They said, *maybe next time!* Except next time, if there was one, was a whole 'nother thing. I had left too many pieces of my heart in too many places now. I should keep moving forever, like a shark, or I should never have left. I never felt at home in a place until I was just about to leave it.

"Business is always good," the man says from his folding chair sedile. As some people age their appearances morph into the universal. Men and women begin to resemble each other. This man was probably a light-skinned Black guy, but he could have been white. The kid outside at the produce stand is definitely a Black kid. Black farmers are a thing out here in the Georgia countryside, unlike in Germany or England. And these days Asian people, and people from Central and South America, pop

up everywhere, with properly slurry, twangy Southern accents. This has always been the case, but has actually improved in my absence. "Not many make time for the Lord on a work day, but you can learn a lot, sitting here in the quiet."

"Um," I say, feeling self-conscious. I love to find a treasure at an unplanned destination. Are Black and white Georgians more comfortable with each other now, or less? I wonder if I can speak honestly with him about what I'm thinking. Whether my rambling confessions would be welcome, or an intrusion on his more than likely hard-earned solitude.

"You'd always be welcome here." His eyes are honest but gentle. He is looking at me.

Tears spring to my eyes like they did at the Immigration desk in the Atlanta airport. A woman, golden-skinned, dark-eyed, stocky and stern and not to be joked around with, stamped my passport with gusto and looked me dead in the eyes as she handed it back. "Welcome home," she said, welcoming me to a club she felt certain of. As if she didn't know how uncertain I felt. She couldn't know that no one ever says that to me anywhere else.

I shake the excess water from two of the peaches onto the concrete slab of the floor although I don't like to be sloppy in public. I saw an American guy at the Tokugawa shrine in Nik-ko, utterly disregarding the procedures for washing first one hand, then the other. He'd taken hold of the dipper with his unclean meat hooks; rinsed his mouth and then spit back into the communal trough. The memory still jerks me awake at night. "Would you like a peach?" I ask the old man.

"Don't mind if I do," he says. I'm not fooled by how picturesque he is. It's not like I'll be doing my weekly grocery shopping with the disinterested teen outside. An eight dollar jar of piccalilli is a bijou idea *I* have about living in Georgia again. No, I'll be driving to Publix with everyone

else in the...public. And I won't be hanging out with this guy on his rusting chair, hanging on every reminiscence of his Alice Walker-type childhood. I'll be eating a ham sandwich at my desk for lunch, just like I've done in every country I've ever lived in except Turkey. Pork products were a little hard to come by there.

I go to the car to finish my peach. Maybe the old guy was fine with swirling the peaches in holy water but I can't bring myself to wash my hands in it. I've got wet wipes in my purse, still on the passenger seat. Car unlocked. No one will rob you out here, but that has been true everywhere we've lived. Or maybe I'm utterly unaware that my guardian angel comes dressed in the Kevlar of privilege.

My phone rings. "Where are you?" Behind my husband I hear the hum of the hotel air conditioner and I shiver. I hate air conditioning. It's hotter in Georgia than almost anywhere but I am always cold here.

"Eating a peach," I say. "I don't know what else to do."

"The little strings will get stuck in your teeth." He's a Midwesterner, which is why he is so charmed by Georgia. It's one of the reasons he's so charmed by me.

"Already there," I say, sucking on my incisors. I'll have to floss later. "It's a metaphor."

"Huh?" My husband, tolerant but bemused as always, is not so secretly looking forward to hanging up the harnesses after so many decades on the trail. He can't wait to mow grass according to the height requirements set forth by the Homeowners Association. He'll bring brownies to the doorsteps (or more likely, some charred thing off the grill) and commiserate about the people with too many gnomes in their yard. He doesn't actually care about the gnomes or the height of the grass, but he is and always has been completely cool with the inevitable.

“You fight everything,” he says. It’s true. It’s a character flaw, or a malabsorption of Army nutrients. I’m the pioneer who leads with her chin. “Just come back to the hotel.”

“Not yet,” I say. I sit in the hot car, one foot grounded on the gravel parking lot, the other hovering over the gas pedal. The brake. I don’t want any more peaches and eventually I get too hot. I throw the pit on the ground and close the car door for the return trip to the charmless hotel – so I can drink a craft beer that’s trying a little too hard, and swim in the rectangular chlorine pool.