

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.