

# Interview: The Problem of the Hero: Peter Molin Talks with Roy Scranton

**Introduction:** Roy Scranton's soon-to-be published *Total Mobilization: American Literature and World War II* expands upon Scranton's controversial 2015 *Los Angeles Review of Books* article "The Myth of the Trauma Hero, from Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper.'" The *LARB* piece asserted that American war literature over-privileges the emotional suffering of white male American combatants at the expense of their war victims, while ignoring larger social and political aspects of militarism and war. In *Total Mobilization* Scranton locates the birth of the trauma hero in canonical World War II fiction and poetry. He connects literature with culture by making two arguments: 1) Treating soldiers as easily-damaged and pitiable victims of war obscures moral reckoning with war guilt and effective reintegration by veterans into civilian society, and 2) identifying and isolating veterans as a sanctified social caste offers veterans a dubious cultural reverence that overestimates the authority of their experience, while satisfying a dubious logic that preserves soldiers their identities as good men and the wars they fought as good wars. In making this argument, Scranton shuffles the deck of World War II-writing, inviting readers to seriously reconsider the cultural work performed by canonical works, and asking them to pay more attention to a number of novels, poems, essays, articles, and movies that tell a different, more nuanced story about World War II and the decades after.

The interview was conducted via a series of phone calls and email exchanges.

– Peter Molin

**PM:** When did the concept of the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural reality begin to form in your mind? Was it related more to your actual service in Iraq or to your reading and beginning efforts to write afterwards?

RS: I can pinpoint the origin of my conceptualization of the trauma hero and, in fact, the origin of what became *Total Mobilization*, in a graduate seminar I took on war literature at the New School, in 2007 or 2008. I was anxious about taking the class, because it was one of the first graduate seminars I was to take, and because I was highly sensitive about the way in which my personal experience in Iraq might distort the classroom dynamic. I wrote the professor an email in advance, asking about the course, expressing my concerns, and assuring him that I was really interested in the material, not in using the classroom as a space to talk about myself. He responded enthusiastically, encouraging me to join the class, and telling me that my personal experience need not be a focus in the seminar, though he was convinced the mere fact of it would help my fellow students better connect with the material.

The syllabus was fairly typical "war lit," jumping from the *Iliad* to [Robert Graves'] *Good Bye to All That* and Wilfred Owen, then a bunch of stuff on Vietnam, then I think ending with [Anthony] Swofford's *Jarhead*. What quickly became apparent, however, was that for the professor, all the material we were reading could only be understood through a combination of Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For this guy, all war literature was a story of trauma. But not just for him: he was merely a particularly dogmatic preacher of what was, I soon realized, a pervasive cultural belief.

Now I'd loved *Hero with a Thousand Faces* when I read it in high school, and spent two or three years annoying my friends by breaking down every movie we saw into its constituent archetypal moments, the giving of the boon, the crossing of the threshold, confronting the father, blah blah blah. But

that had been a long time ago, and I'd long since realized the limits of Campbell's reductionist approach, despite the real insights it often offered. And while much war literature did seem to fit loosely within the adventure-story framework Campbell elaborated, reading something like [Ernst Junger's] *Storm of Steel*, to take only one example, through the lens of trauma seemed deeply mistaken, not only missing what was most interesting about the work, but wrenching its central premises into an alien ideology. The same thing seemed true with the *Iliad*, which is deeply misunderstood when viewed through the lens of trauma (as in [Jonathan] Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which misreads Homer and misunderstands Greek culture, though does nevertheless have real insights), as are numerous other works.

So I did what I do, which was to ask annoying questions, find counter-examples, and probe the professor's all-encompassing theory for weak points. The entire seminar was soon taken over by our intellectual grappling: things rapidly spun out of control and devolved into a power struggle. I was fighting for my intellectual integrity, my authority as a veteran, and my grade, while he was fighting for—well, it turned out that his brother had gone to Vietnam and come home fucked up, and this professor seemed to have devoted his life since to fixing his brother by proxy. I did not know when I started the class that I was to be another such proxy, but when our conflict climaxed in him sending me an eight-page email telling me how sorry he was that I was so traumatized and how much he wished he could help me, I went to the department chair.

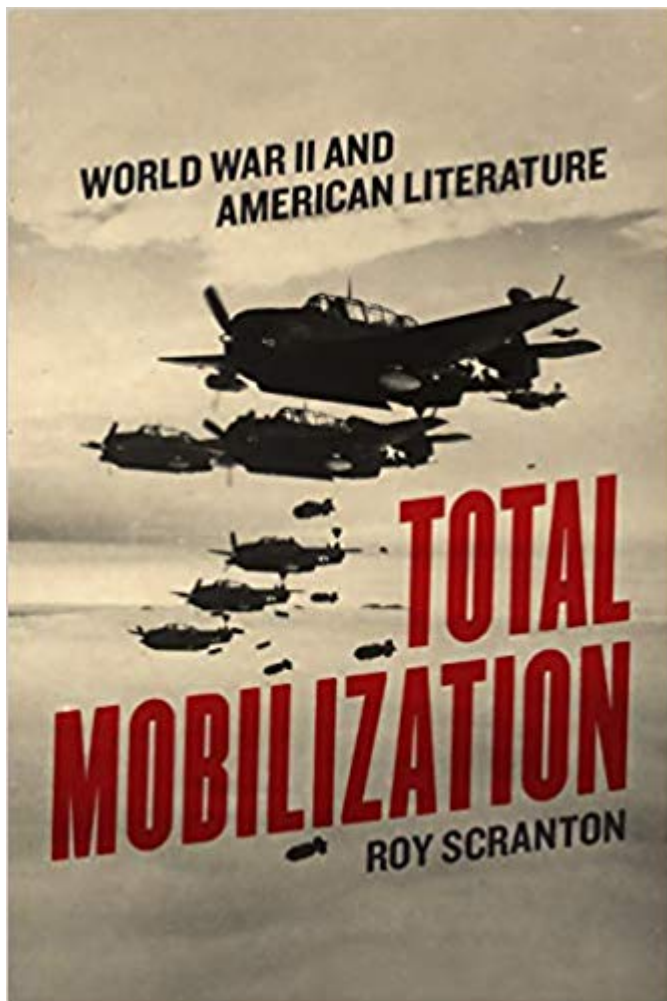
The professor was not invited back to teach. I saved my grade, wrote an essay about trauma and confession that was published in George Kovach's journal *Consequence* ("The Sinner's Strip-Tease: Rereading *The Things They Carried*," *Consequence*, 2:1, Spring 2010), and started delving deep into the idea of trauma: where it came from, how it worked, and why everybody seemed to conflate it with socially organized violence.

PM: At what point did you begin to sense that the trauma hero trope worked not as a redemptive effort by authors to “humanize” soldiers by illustrating the brutality of war, but a pernicious cultural mechanism that valorized an unhealthy way of thinking about soldiers, war, and militarism? Was there a specific book, thinker, or event that crystalized the impression?

RS: From the beginning, really, I was asking myself how this worked and who it served. Cui bono, right? I was also—let’s just say that I was deeply formed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, and at the same time as I was taking that seminar on war literature I remember reading Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Now Foucault... I’m not going to spend any time defending Foucault, as a thinker or a historian or whatever. I’ve always thought he’s the Jamiroquai to Nietzsche’s Stevie Wonder. But a key point of the *History of Sexuality*, which is a basically Nietzschean point, is that saying we’re *not* going to talk about something is a way to talk about it. Repression is a mode of expression. Foucault made this point about the Victorians and sex, but it’s worth keeping in mind anytime you start looking at cultural practices, since taboos and mysteries and so on are usually key to a culture.

This may seem sideways, but it’s important to remember that trauma is always “that which cannot be spoken.” Recall Tim O’Brien’s mystical lyricism about how there’s no such thing as a true war story (which I discuss in my chapter on trauma). Narrating the unspeakable is a power move: it designates you as a master of mystery. Now I already knew about and was suspicious of the moral authority invested in veterans simply by fact of their having joined the military. It was a pretty short step then to see how trauma functioned as a way of evoking and preserving a sense of mystery around that authority. Luckily, I happened to come across Israeli historian Yuval Harari’s magnificent book, *The Ultimate*

*Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, which provides a deep synoptic cultural history of how the experience of war changed in the west from being understood as a testament to one's capabilities, like a bullet point on a CV, to being understood as a revelation of esoteric wisdom. That book was very useful for helping me understand how contemporary perspectives on the experience of war evolved and what kinds of cultural work they do.



PM: Early in [\*Total Mobilization\*](#), you list a fairly conventional canon of well-known World War II fiction and poetry. But these are not the works you want to discuss in *Total Mobilization*. Instead, you bring to the fore authors such as poet Kenneth Koch and popular entertainment fare such as a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Why? What do we get by paying attention to this “alternative canon”?

RS: Norman Mailer wrote in "The White Negro" in 1957 that "The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it." Yet by the early 2000s, if not before, a clear mythic framework had emerged for understanding World War II, which can be seen in the pre-eminent WWII films of the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both from 1998, that re-interprets WWII through both the American war in Vietnam and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. This framework interprets World War II as primarily an individual traumatic experience of violence that leads the individual to a more enlightened state, in *Saving Private Ryan* to a deeper patriotism, in *The Thin Red Line* to a deeper Transcendentalist engagement with the non-human world. But these films come out of a major cultural revision of the meaning of World War II that happened primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, first in literature, then in film, which laid the groundwork for these more explicitly trauma-based narratives. The mere fact of this should strike observers as puzzling, since World War II was an unquestionable American victory, a war in which America suffered fewer casualties than any other major combatant nation, and the origin of a half-century of American global hegemony. *Total Mobilization* explores two questions concurrently: First, how did World War II (and by extension, all war) come to be identified with trauma? Second, what is this re-interpretation obscuring?

What I found in my research by going back to the literature of World War II with fresh eyes, discounting the academic and literary consensus which tendentiously declares that World War II "didn't produce any great literature," is that writers attempting to make sense of WWII—from Ralph Ellison to Herman Wouk, from Wallace Stevens to Kenneth Koch, from James Jones to Joan Didion—were obsessed by a set of problems I group under the idea of "the problem of the hero," essentially questions about how the individual relates to society in a time of total mobilization.

What was at stake was a conflict between different kinds of stories society told itself about its values, which is to say, how Americans told themselves the story of who they were: on the one hand, narratives in which every individual was an equal and independent member of a commercial democracy where everything was for sale, and on the other hand narratives in which every individual was subordinated to the collective and the most important thing anyone could do would be to sacrifice their life for the nation. The total mobilization of American society to fight World War II demanded, in Kenneth Burke's words, a "change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives."

In effect, World War II opened wide a conflict that had been building within the western world since the Napoleonic Wars: the conflict between nationalism and capitalism, specifically the conflict between the metaphoric logic of nationalism and metaphoric logic of capitalism around the issue of bodily sacrifice. This is the conflict at the heart of *Total Mobilization*, the conflict at the center of World War II writing from the 1940s to the 1960s, the conflict for which the "trauma hero" provides an imaginary solution. Looking at works that have fallen outside the canon—such as Kenneth Koch's war poetry, wartime Bugs Bunny cartoons, Wallace Stevens's wartime poetry (which is generally derided or ignored as war poetry), or James Dickey, who has been more or less deliberately abandoned—while also revisiting canonical works such as Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," *Catch-22*, and *The Thin Red Line* with new eyes, helps us see the complex historical reality that the post-Cold-War academic and literary framework erases and obscures.



Author Roy Scranton

**PM: In particular, I was struck by your rereading of Randall Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." How has that well-known very short poem been misunderstood or not appreciated in its full magnitude?**

RS: Jarrell, as many readers will know, was drafted during the war, and served stateside as an instructor in "celestial navigation." He never saw combat, but he did see plenty of men who were headed that way. One interesting thing about Jarrell is that he writes all these poems in which youthful, virile young men are sacrificed to state power, but his letters show a pervasive and thoroughgoing contempt for his fellow soldiers. What he thought of the actual men he served with (he calls them racists and says they are intellectually "indistinguishable from Cream of Wheat"), however, is less important than the use he made of them in his poetry, which was to revitalize the British trench lyric through a Protestant American mindset. In his poetry, pre-eminently focused on bombers, Jarrell is performing a complex ritual substitution: the victims of American political violence—German and Japanese soldiers and civilians—is being replaced by the agents of that very violence—the bomber crew. The picture is flipped, so that instead of seeing Germans and Japanese women and children physically wounded and killed by American bombing, we focus instead on the suffering that bombing causes the person doing it. With the fully developed trauma hero myth the suffering is purely spiritual, but we can



see Jarrell working it out de novo, as it were, making the transition from the physical—as in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”—to the spiritual—as in the poem “Eighth Air Force.”

The observation that Jarrell turns killers into victims isn't new. As Helen Vendler noted in her 1969 review of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*, “The secret of [Jarrell's] war poems is that in the soldiers he has found children; what is the ball turret gunner but a baby who has lost his mother?” What I do in *Total Mobilization* is look at the context and mechanism for how this happens within the genre I identify as the “bomber lyric,” within the literature of World War II, and within broader currents of American literature from 1945 to the early 2000s.

As I write in *Total Mobilization*: “If we want to understand the human experience of war, we must come to terms with numerous difficult and unpleasant facts. One of them is that no agent of violence can be deemed innocent or faultless, even if that agent is drafted against their will to fight in a war ultimately considered just. We must understand the soldier first, foremost, and always as an agent of state power, since that is their objective social role. Hence stories of soldiers must be read in light of their complicity with and participation in sovereign power. Soldiers are the state's killers. That's their job. Jarrell's efforts to excuse the men engaged in bombing the German people on the basis that they like puppies and opera, or because they are mortal, turn soldiers into victims of their own violence. Such efforts are not only deluded and obscurantist but ethically naïve.”

**PM:** In the chapter section titled “The Hero as Riddle: The Negro Hero and the Nation Within the Nation” you tie together Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John Oliver Killen's 1962 novel about a black quartermaster company in World War II *And Then We Heard the Thunder* to interrogate the racial dimensions of the trauma hero. What is significant about the African-American literary perspective on World War II?

RS: What looking at the African-American literature around World War II really helps illuminate is how much the question of war literature, and the related question of the hero, are related to what Benedict Anderson famously called "the imagined community of the nation." War literature qua "war literature" is fundamentally tangled up in questions about the national identity of the writers and subjects of that literature. This is why when people say "Vietnam War literature," they typically mean [Tim] O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or [Larry] Heinemann's *Paco's Story* or [Karl] Marlantes' *Matterhorn*, rather than Bôo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* or Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*.

The single most important issue at stake in the African-American literature of World War II is the question of national belonging. As James Baldwin puts it in a reminiscence written many years later, "This was in 1943. We were fighting the Second World War. *We*: who was this *we*? For this war was being fought, as far as I could tell, to bring freedom to everyone with the exception of Hagar's children and the 'yellow-bellied Japs'.... I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heartbreak and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. (And we *did* our duty.) The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can't betray a country you don't have.... And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens."

As I discuss in the work of Baldwin, Richard Wright, John Oliver Killens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and most notably Ralph Ellison, the dilemma faced by many African-Americans under total mobilization during World War II was that they were being *ordered* to sacrifice themselves for the war, they *wanted* to sacrifice themselves for the war, but they were structurally incapable of actually sacrificing themselves—because while they could serve and while they could die in that service, like Messman "Dorie" Miller died, like

Lieutenant John R. Fox died, like Sergeant Reuben Rivers died, their deaths were not recognized as legitimate sacrifices for the nation, since they were not seen as genuine constituents of that nation. In Jim Crow America, the negro was not regarded as a free citizen, hence while the negro was expected to give their life for their country—or indeed anytime it was demanded—that act was not regarded as sacred.

For writers such as Ellison and Killens, this problem emerged not only as a sense of having been prohibited from joining the (white) nation, but also as a provocation to understand their own identity as already existing within a “nationality,” what James Baldwin called “a nation within a nation,” which is to say Black nationalism.

When we take into account how nationalism is constructed through ideas of shared blood, either through inheritance or through sacrifice, we begin to see the powerful ideological work narratives of collective violence do in shoring up cultural hierarchies—or in opening them to criticism and question. It’s no mystery that the trauma hero in American war literature has been predominantly white, or that when we talk about “American war literature,” people mostly mean literature by white men. Militarism, American identity, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and in fact have been woven together since World War II over and over again, in novels and poems and films that focus on traumatized white citizen-soldiers suffering for the violence they themselves unleashed on countless unnamed Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan bodies.

**PM: An author who is not a veteran and who is not often thought of as a writer with an abiding interest in World War II is Joan Didion. But *Total Mobilization* asserts her importance in understanding how the American West and the World War II Pacific Theater were connected in ways that differed from the American East Coast’s connection with the war in Europe. How can we think of Didion as a World War II**

writer?

RS: One of the central conceits of so-called “war literature” is that it is primarily by and about men in combat: Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, Tim O’Brien. But the violence of combat, as dramatic as it may be, is only one aspect of the larger phenomena of socially organized mass violence. Even thinking back to the *Iliad*, say, only parts of that work are about actual combat, and not necessarily the most interesting parts. Who can forget the scene on the battlements between Hector and Andromache, where Hector’s son Astyanax recoils from his father’s helmeted face in fear?

The Trojan War was perhaps the greatest literary and dramatic subject of Athenian culture, but the work addressing it was in no way restricted to narrow representations of the combat experiences of individual warriors. From Homer’s *Odyssey* to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* to Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* to Euripedes’s *The Trojan Women*, we see Athenian dramatists and poets exploring a wide range of that war’s events and effects. Similarly, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, World War II was a hugely important cultural event in American history, easily the most important event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and when we take a wide view of post-1945 American culture, we can see that cultural and aesthetic representations of World War II have struggled to come to terms with its staggering historical, ethical, political, and psychological complexity in a variety of ways, in poetry, novels, musicals, history, television mini-series, comic books, video games, and films. From Pearl S. Buck’s novel *China Sky*, depicting American doctors caught in the Japanese invasion of China, to the first-person shooters set in World War II that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with the now-classic *Wolfenstein 3D* and continuing with the blockbuster franchises *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*; from Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* to George Lucas’s *Star Wars*; from Chester Himes’s novel of racial tensions in wartime Los Angeles, *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, to Don

DeLillo's *White Noise*, the protagonist of which is a professor of "Hitler Studies," the variety of American cultural production from the last seventy years that works explicitly, allegorically, and sometimes unconsciously with and through World War II is at once a testament to the war's importance and an overwhelming strain on our efforts to understand it.

Yet if we were to go looking for the war's impact strictly in the canonical "war literature," which is focused on the traumatic combat experience of individual soldiers, we would not see it. The focus on trauma obscures and elides the historical complexity of the event. This is how someone like Joan Didion, for whom the effect of World War II on American society is probably the central subject of her career, can be excluded from the canon of "war literature."

There is much to say about Didion's work, not least to speak of its sheer technical brilliance, or of the interesting place she occupies in literary history, as the American heir of Conrad and Orwell and the progenitor of the pop-art merging of advertising and the Stein-Hemingway tradition we eventually see fully developed in Don DeLillo, for example. But first and foremost she is a chronicler of American empire, the complex way that the frontier mentality of "the West" transformed into the Cold War mentality of "the West," through the crucible of victory in World War II. As a native Californian, old enough to remember Pearl Harbor but too young to do anything about, dragged around the country by her father (a reservist called to active duty), who saw her home state undergo a dramatic transformation from what was essentially agricultural feudalism to being perhaps the primary sector of the military-industrial complex and the utopian dream-space of suburban America, Didion was remarkably well placed to witness the disruptive and disturbing emergence of the post-45 American military Leviathan, which she tracked through her fiction, journalism, and memoir, from her first novel, *Run, River*, which is about the effects of World War II on agricultural

life in the Sacramento Valley, to her memoir *Where I Was From*, which explicitly connects the frontier mentality of the Western pioneers with the emergence of American hegemony, while also elucidating the inescapable, long-term effects of military industrialization on Californian culture. Indeed, as she argues about modern Hawaiian culture in a key article I discuss in *Total Mobilization*, postwar Californian culture is inextricable from hypostasizing American militarism. And while it may be easier to see this in the west, in Hawaii and California, which only exist as they do today because of World War II, the insight applies to the whole nation. Since 1942, the United States has been a society mobilized for war, organized for war, even if only a small cadre do the actual fighting. Didion helps us see that.

**PM: To what extent do veteran authors and artists knowingly and culpably participate in the trauma hero narrative? I would think, or maybe hope, that most would be horrified to think that their works instantiate or re-instantiate misguided, reactionary, and generally oppressive cultural and historical practices and patterns of thinking. But you suggest that they do.**

RS: The most generous response would be to say that we're all figuring it out as we go. We have the stories we love, the stories we were raised on, like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, for example, we have the stories we take up when we're trying to figure out how to make sense of an experience, we see how people respond to the stories we try to tell—and we make decisions as we go. Especially those of us trying to have careers, trying to reach a wider public; you can't just say whatever shit you feel like. There's some back and forth, whoever you wind up talking to, and sometimes there's more freedom and sometimes there's less, and most folks will take the path of least resistance rather than try to fight their way through to a deeper understanding. Some people maybe know better and choose not to give a fuck. But

most people think they're good people, most writers believe they're trying to really get into the complexity, and that they're doing the best they can. The deeper issue is that people lie first of all to *themselves*, but that's just human nature.

One example we could discuss from *Total Mobilization* is Brian Turner. I know Brian, I like Brian, I respect Brian. I have long admired his poetry. I think he's a good man and a good poet. But the situation he found himself in with the cover of *Here, Bullet...* The cover of that book is a striking visual example of the work that the trauma hero does to refocus attention from the typically brown-skinned victims of war to the spiritual travails of the white American soldier: it shows Turner himself, alone in an empty landscape, facing the viewer with a thousand-yard stare. As Turner describes the process that led to this cover (in an interview in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*), he and his editor decided to literally erase Iraqi bodies from the photo they used because he thought the blunt truth of his experience would repulse readers. The thing is, he's not wrong. From a certain perspective, he made the absolute right choice. On the other hand, telling people what they want to hear, trimming off the unpleasant bits, leaving off the hooded Iraqi prisoners—all that contributes to a collective vision of the Iraq War that focuses on the psychological suffering of American soldiers at the expense of even *seeing* the bodies of the people we killed, never mind discussing the larger political context, which is an outright scandal. So do I sympathize with Brian, as a young poet making decisions about his first book, to minimize the unpleasant reality of the Iraq War and try to keep people focused on his poetry? Of course. But I think we also have to consider the big picture.

Several scholars have begun attending to the ways that the "veteran-writer" operates in the MFA economy of postwar American literature, most pre-eminently Mark McGurl, Eric

Bennett, and Joseph Darda. What they've found is that the role of the veteran-writer has been privileged in the MFA-dominated literary economy as a form of white ethnic identity writing. Just like writers of color are expected and encouraged to put themselves forward first of all as representatives of their racial or ethnic trauma, so are veteran-writers expected and encouraged to put themselves forward as representatives of their war-time trauma (A broader critique of how identity-based grievance works to create subjects conformable to the commodity logic of neoliberal capitalism can be found in the work of writers such as Joan Scott, Allen Feldman, Wendy Brown, and Asad Haider, among others). These expectations function all along the line, at every level of gatekeeping, from MFA admissions to agents to publishing to award committees. Working against these expectations is profoundly risky, especially for emerging writers.

It can be done—Percival Everett's wicked satire *Erasure* comes to mind, or Eric Bennett's novel *A Big Enough Lie*, perhaps my own novel *War Porn*—but it's not usually going to win you accolades.

**PM:** My reading of *War Porn* is that its Iraq vet protagonist refutes sympathetic identification as a trauma hero, nor can we grant him the experiential authority of the "noble veteran." What is the relationship in your mind (and chronologically) of *War Porn* and the academic work that became *Total Mobilization*?

RS: I started *War Porn* pretty soon after coming back from Iraq, while still in the army and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, then finished the first draft the summer after I ETS'd, in Berlin in 2006. There was a lot of revision ahead, but the main generative work was done. And as you suggest, I was even at that point working out a pretty strong critique of the trauma hero, even if I hadn't distinctly articulated the figure itself. I feel like *Total Mobilization* is working out analytically some of the things that *War Porn* was working out



narratively.

PM: Your framing of the issue seems divisive and perhaps even something of a betrayal of the veteran-writer community, which we might say you helped establish with the seminal 2013 *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* anthology (co-edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher, and containing work by contemporary veteran-writing luminaries such as Brian Turner, Phil Klay, Colby Buzzell, David Abrams, Brian Van Reet, and Jacob Siegel, and military spouse Siobhan Fallon). Can you talk about the desire or efforts by contemporary vet-writers to form a veteran-writer community? Can you talk about how you see your work in relation?

RS: In the conclusion of *Total Mobilization*, where I talk about the end of the Cold War and shifting arguments about the meaning of World War II, I bring up as an example the National Air and Space Museum's attempted exhibit on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2. The exhibit failed, largely because of pressure from veterans' groups. One of the sticking points was the number of expected American casualties in the planned invasion of Japan, which was a key piece of evidence in arguments about whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified. The historical record—the consensus of professional historians—is clear: there was a clear path to surrender with Japan that would obviate any Normandy-style landing on Honshu and Kyushu, which invasion the US military at the time expected would lead to 30,000 to 50,000 casualties. The Air Force Association and others kept insisting that the language in the exhibit employ later estimates of 500,000 or more casualties, which come from Truman and Henry Stimson's postwar memoirs and are unsupported by the historical record. As military historian John Ray Skates notes in his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, "the source of the large numbers used after the war by Truman, Stimson, and Churchill to justify the use of the atomic bomb has yet to be discovered." At one point in the argument, Tom Crouch, who was

the chairman of the museum's aeronautics department, put the problem neatly: "Do you want to do an exhibition intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want to do an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both."

Historian Edward Linenthal describes this as conflict between a "commemorative" view and a "historical" view. We face the same conflict every time we come back to the act of representing war, discussing war, talking about war literature, because—as I argue in *Total Mobilization*—war is one of the key practices through which human beings construct their collective identity. Every discussion about war, about a museum exhibit, about the cover of a book of poetry, about a poem, is a discussion about who "we" are, which is to say what it means to be American. And the conflict Linenthal describes, the conflict exemplified in the issue at the National Air and Space Museum, is over whether we should focus on commemoration—remembering together, emphasizing our bonds and our unity, reassuring ourselves of our basic goodness—or on the objective historical record, which often shows the American military and American government doing horrible things for morally unjustifiable reasons.

I've seen this play out in smaller ways in the vet writers community. When we were putting *Fire and Forget* together, around 2011 or 2012, it seemed like one major thing vet writers could do for each was to help keep each other honest: to help keep each other from telling readers what they wanted and expected to hear. I think a lot about Jake Siegel's story from *Fire and Forget*, "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," in this respect: the experience of war the characters in that story are commemorating is so raw, so powerful, that the idea of betraying the experience is tantamount to betraying your battle buddy. But as the vet writers community became more definitively established, as the actual experiences of war

have faded into the past, as people have built careers as professional veterans, I've seen the community grow increasingly hostile to dissent. It seems like there's been a real closing of ranks, a sense of a community supporting and protecting each other, and any real critical function has been lost (present company excepted, along with a few others). Commemoration has won out over any concern for the historical record. This is no doubt connected to the way that the "vet writer" serves to recuperate white ethnic militarism as a commodifiable victim identity (as discussed above), a fundamentally unstable identity formation given the historical and contemporary privilege afforded white men in American society, and given the tendency of militarism (however tempered by liberal multiculturalism) to resolve into a fascistic worship of power as such.

**PM: The conclusion of *Total Mobilization* asserts that contemporary war-writing about Iraq and Afghanistan represents a continuation, even a doubling-down, on the trauma hero trope. How has this come about and what are the consequences?**

RS: I wouldn't say it represents a "doubling-down"—while I think trauma has remained central to contemporary war writing about Iraq and Afghanistan, I also think that many writers have looked for ways to innovate, if only to distinguish themselves from previous generations and each other. The film *American Sniper* and Kevin Powers' novel *Yellow Birds* are the most obvious and conventional versions of the contemporary trauma hero story, but even Powers struggles to renovate the trope, as I argue in *Total Mobilization*, by pushing through O'Brien's total negation of truth to wind up with something that is the obverse of Hemingway and Owen's insistence on particular factual sensory data: representing the act of violence as the origin of linguistic indeterminacy and the font of literary production as such. And with [Phil Klay's] *Redeployment*, [Brian Van Reet's] *Spoils*, [Elliot Ackerman's]

*Green on Blue*, and [Will Mackin's] *Bring Out the Dog*, just for a few of the most talked-about examples, you can see writers struggling to get past the trauma hero, with varying degrees of gumption and success. Overall I think it has to do with long-term cultural changes: trauma remains a powerful concept for understanding reality, but I suspect that it's on its way out, and that a new emphasis on materiality is emerging. Which is to say, that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in trauma is increasingly less persuasive than that which is both unspeakable and indubitable in the body. But this is only a supposition. We'll have to wait and see. But as soon as the traumatized veteran becomes useful again, we see him return. The trauma hero will probably be around for a long time.

**PM: In practical terms, how can understanding the trauma hero as a literary trope and cultural myth help us think better, more clearly, about actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war? What might the nation, or its military-medical apparatus, do to help them?**

RS: Well, I've written a work of literary and cultural history, not a practical guide to coping with trauma. I would say, though, that the entire way that we understand "actual veterans psychologically damaged and emotionally troubled by war" must be understood as process of collective meaning-making. The psychologically damaged veteran is certainly suffering, but that suffering takes shape in performing a specific social role, which is the "traumatized veteran." As long as we stay within the bounds of the discourse, there's no way to "help" such a person by pointing out that their genuine suffering is culturally produced. I suppose we might tell them "trauma isn't real," but then what? They have to make sense of their experience somehow, and the best that could come from delegitimizing a culturally dominant way of making sense of experience would be the emergence of a new way of making sense of experience. Are there better and worse ways of making meaning? I think so. But that's another discussion. The only

*practical* help my project might offer is, I would hope, some understanding of the ways that the “actual veteran” exists in relation to the “nation.”

I’m a Spinozist at heart, which means I’m a materialist, but it also means that I believe freedom comes first of all from understanding. Until you understand what compels you to understand your experience through certain roles, frameworks, and practices, you’ll be stuck performing those roles, seeing through those frameworks, and acting out those practices. Understanding may never provide physical or social liberation, but it can at least open a space for some freedom of thought and movement, and the possibility of equanimity toward the world as it exists, which is to say a sense of peace.

**PM: On what grounds can a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan feel good about his or her service? On what grounds can a veteran construct a guilt-free life post-military?**

RS: I’m not here to make former soldiers feel good about their experience. The whole premise feels a bit absurd to me. Nor am I interested in articulating a way for anyone to live life “guilt free.” I think guilt, like shame, can be useful and healthy. How else do you learn and grow as a person except by confronting your mistakes and owning them, internalizing them, recognizing what you did and finding a way forward? “Guilt-free” is an advertising slogan.

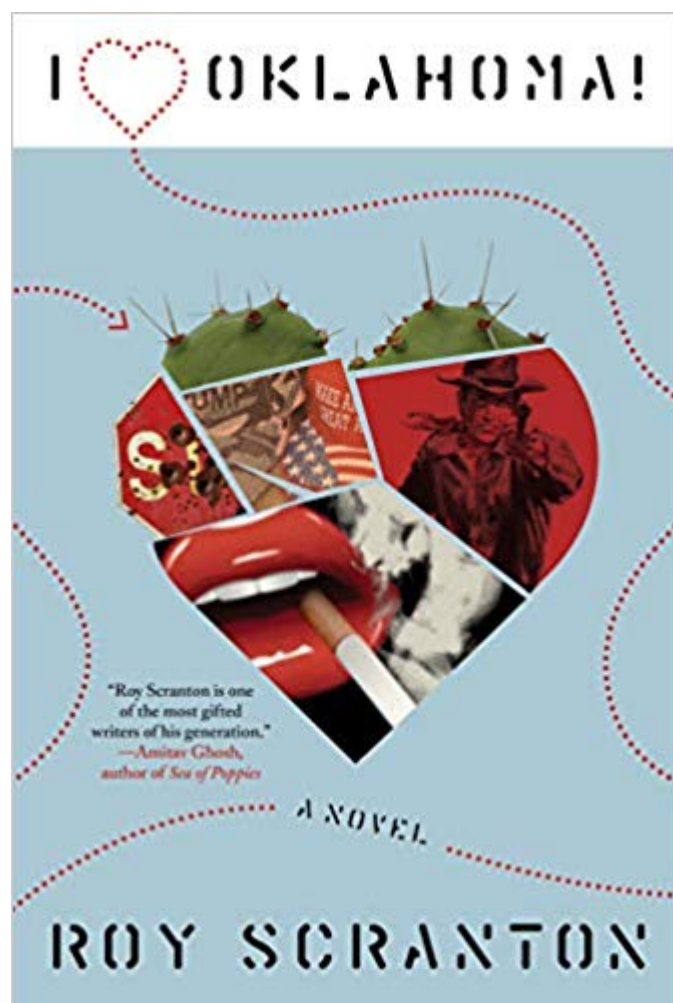
This goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the difference between “commemorative” and “historical” views about war and the role of the veteran in American culture. I feel no obligation as a scholar, critic, or writer to “commemorate” war or to “honor” the direct role some people play in America’s wars. On the contrary, I feel an obligation to be faithful to the historical record, objective facts, and unpleasant realities. Because I am myself a veteran, some people see a contradiction there, as if selling my ass to the US Army for four years somehow obliges me to participate in

the collective myth-making of American militarism. But such an expectation is absurd. I refuse to play the role of the professional vet.

It seems clear that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are unjustifiable in any moral sense. Everyone involved was not only complicit, but an active agent in genuine evil and massive human suffering. You have to come to terms with that.

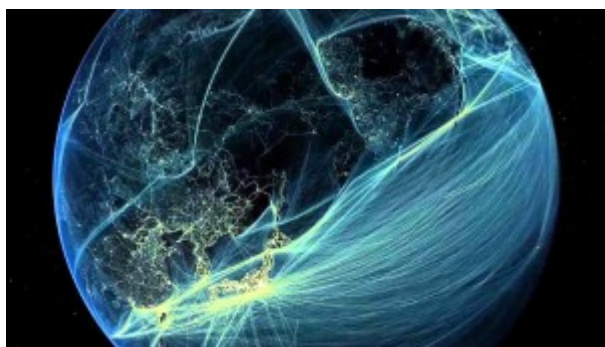
**PM:** You also have a novel coming out this year, titled [I \[Heart\] Oklahoma?](#) What can we expect?

**RS:** It's a "road movie novel," a vision-quest, a deep dive into the blood myths of modern America. Let's just say there wind up being a lot of bodies on the highway. LitHub is publishing an excerpt, which I'd suggest as the easiest way to see whether you feel like taking this particular death trip.



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# Not Quite Ready to Die in the Anthropocene



(Originally published at [The Hooded Utilitarian](#))

The recent Paris Climate Conference has been called the last best chance for the leaders of the world, nations and multinational corporations, to agree upon a framework that can somewhat mitigate and limit the compounding effects of climate change. Some have commented that a best-case scenario for such an agreement would still not prevent a future of unbearable heat and widespread famine, drought, war, and mass migrations; a total failure to reach a feasible agreement, like the previous iteration in Copenhagen in 2009, would mean much, much worse: no less than the end of human civilization as we know it and the extinction of huge numbers of plant and animal species, possibly including *homo sapiens*. Roy Scranton, in his new book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, cleaves to the latter option as the most likely scenario, and this slim volume is dense with big history, scientific nitty-gritty, and philosophical reflections.

Scranton opens the book by invoking his experience as a soldier in the Iraq War, driving and patrolling through Baghdad and pondering the collapse of a once-bustling ancient

city into chaos and violence. Back home in the States and safe once again, he witnessed the similar breakdown of order and imposition of martial law in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Scranton connects these localized disaster zones of social breakdown with the future fate of the planet and the human race when climate change accelerates and worsens. He cites a litany of military planners, economists, and scientists to draw his indisputable and alarming conclusion: "Global warming is not the latest version of a hoary fable of annihilation. It is not hysteria. It is a fact. And we have likely already passed the point where we could have done anything about it." Sobering words.

Over the next four chapters, we are treated to a God's eye view, in the style of Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis*, of geological eras, the rise of homo sapiens, the evolution of energy and industry, the seemingly intractable conundrum of the greenhouse gas effect, the near impossibility that the nations and leaders of the world will come to a working solution that will fix things, and the universality of violence in our primate species. Scranton presents well-researched and argued points on an impressive range of topics with a concise and continually compelling sense of conviction.

The fifth and final chapter, entitled "A New Enlightenment", is the most original, interesting, challenging, and vexing part of the book. Scranton opens with an epigram from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest pieces of literature on earth which was rediscovered by chance only 150 years ago. The epic tells of the adventures of the powerful king Gilgamesh and his wild companion, Enkidu, as they unite their opposing forces against the gods themselves, forcing the gods to strike down Enkidu. Gilgamesh becomes distraught over the death of his friend and wanders the earth seeking a way to conquer death. Frustrated in the end, Gilgamesh curses the futility of existence. His experience lives on, though, and offers, as Scranton says, "a lesson in the importance of sustaining and



recuperating cultural heritage in the wake of climate change." It also represents "not only the fragility of our deep cultural heritage, but its persistence." For the author, the specter of climate change is such a monumental problem that we have no hope of solving it; rather, we should focus on maintaining and deepening our humanism and protecting our rich cultural legacy in order that we will both have a softer descent into the envisioned post-apocalyptic future, and that this rich heritage painstakingly accrued over millenia may be rediscovered one day by our survivors in order to rebuild a new civilization. Our study of philosophy, the ancient classics, and Shakespeare, as rewarding as it may be, creates something of a non sequitur when used as a transition to the idea that our unfortunate inheritors will be fighting for resources and survival in a post-apocalyptic world where life will revert to that pre-state existence invoked by Hobbes: "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is a far-reaching, erudite, and cultured book with a bleak view of humanity and its future. The author draws upon a wide variety of philosophical ideas to make his point, from Heraclitus ("Life, whether for a mosquito, a person, or a civilization, is a constant process of becoming...Life is a flow."), to Hegel ("The human being is this Night, this empty nothingness which contains everything in its simplicity."), to Heidegger ("We fall into the world caught between two necessities, compelled to live, born to die, and reconciling them has forever been one of our most challenging puzzles."). More than any schools of thought, though, it seems like the author subscribes on some level to the Stoicism of Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius when he says "Learning to die means learning to let go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, and stability. Learning to let go of salvation. Learning to let go

of hope. Learning to let go of death.” This echoes once again the oft-repeated quote by Montaigne that “to philosophize is to learn how to die.” In both the title of this book and the many references to “learning to die”, I think we could easily substitute the phrase “philosophizing” without losing any significance; for Scranton envisions a dying world in which we will all need to become philosophers if we are to hold onto our humanity.

Fear of death is universal among humans and many of the higher mammals. It likely spawned our myths as well as our art. It is only the philosophers who do not avoid it or fear it, but look it clearly in the face. This is true of Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, the Zen Masters, the Bodhisattvas, Hume, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, and many others who have spent their lives contemplating death not as a morbid fascination but as a means to improving and perfecting their own lives. If it is difficult for most people to attain such peacefulness of mind even after a lifetime of meditation, it is even more unfathomable to find any comfort in the inconvenient truth that the Earth will be rendered uninhabitable in a few million years, and that the cold death of the universe will follow in its wake a few billion years later. The cycle of life and death does not occur on an individual level, or even that of an entire species; it includes planets, stars, and the universe itself. Numerous other books, films, and stories, including *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, discuss this tragic reality in one way or another; Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*, Asimov’s “The Last Question”, Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, Lars Trier’s *Melancholia*, Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, and the Samurai manual *Hagakure*, which Scranton read in Iraq as a way of dealing with the pervasive and daily dance of death.

Everything in the book springs from the idea that global warming is a problem too big for humans to deal with based on the total lack of realistic and practical alternatives we have

to stop it. On this point, I fully understand the enormity of the problem, the almost complete lack of political and corporate will to change our entire world economic system and sacrifice short-term profit, and the bleakness of the future we therefore guarantee for ourselves; but I do not, and cannot, fully endorse the complete resignation of the search and struggle for solutions that the author advocates. On the merits, I have no issue with any of his conclusions except for his certainty of failure in the face of global warming. I am by no means hopeful about the state of the climate and the geopolitical effects that my children will witness, but I think that is exactly why pervading pessimism must give way to de rigueur active optimism for the sake of our survival. The current Paris Climate Conference will be not the last best chance, but the first great step to further increase momentum towards a global solution to the extremely daunting but not impossible crisis we face. If that means a change away from neoliberal capitalism towards a more sustainable future, as Scranton alludes to, so be it.

Overall, the book is exceedingly ambitious and almost too wide-ranging for its own good, and it feels like the solution offered by the author in the face of a crisis he goes to great lengths to explain renders the conclusion relatively feeble and unconvincing. It is not really a work of philosophy as much as a *cri de coeur* over the indispensability of philosophy and the humanities as a way of securing "the fate of humanity itself." I do believe, along with the author, that a deep sense of compassion and humanism are necessary to continued civilization, but so is collective action. My grasp of philosophy helps me cope with the thought of my and the world's eventual annihilation, but my appreciation of human craft, art, technology, and collective potential to solve problems tells me that we will not go gently into that good night.