

Poetry by Amalie Flynn +
Images by Pamela Flynn:
"#150," "#151," "#152,"
"#153"



Flow #150

SPIDER / 150

Thick in Louisiana swamps

Atchafalaya Basin

Hot cypress shooting out

Stretching in that bayou

Where pipelines

Pumping black gold oil

Cross across the swamp

Like spider veins.



Flow #151

TRACKS / 151

How I find tiny cuts

The skin of my inner

Thighs outer lip my

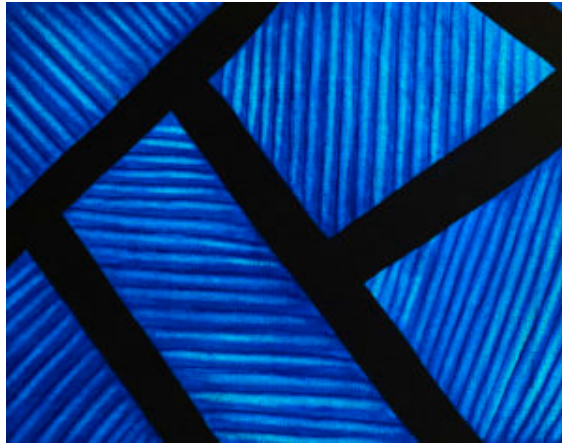
Labia

Cuts from his finger

Nails small bloody

Crescents

Like beetle tracks.



Flow #152

SPOIL / 152

Or deep in a swamp

How oil companies

Create canals

Push earth into piles

Push mud into banks

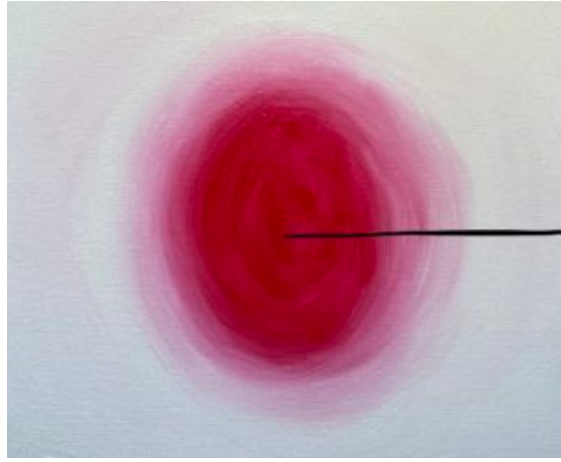
These spoil banks or

Dams

That block blocking

Water so it cannot

Flow.



Flow #153

CLAM / 153

The sky is full of trees

Now after

After he hits me over

The head

With a pipe metal pipe

Hard on

The crown of my skull

Bone and

Suture cracking like a

Clam shell.

[Pattern of Consumption](#) is a year long project featuring 365 poems by Amalie Flynn and 365 images by Pamela Flynn. The poetry and images focus on the assault on women and water.

Wrongful Appropriation of the Soul

In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

One: Complicity

Every time I read another account of sexual assault in the armed forces—most recently, when I read Senator Martha McSally’s recent statement that she’d been raped by a senior officer, hadn’t reported the assault, and continues to support leaving the prosecution of sexual assault cases in the hands of military commanders—I think of the last thing that poet Audre Lorde ever said to me.

I said goodbye to Audre one night shortly before her son Jonathan and I reported to Naval Officer Candidate School in 1988. I didn’t know then that it would be our final conversation: the breast cancer she’d survived a decade earlier had metastasized in her liver, but homeopathic injections prescribed by a doctor in Switzerland had been keeping the tumors under control for four years. Audre was a warrior, and at that time she seemed

invincible.

Still, she never wasted time or words. If she spoke, what she said mattered. One listened with respect, and remembered.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes: "Jerri," she said, "don't let the Navy steal your soul."

In the decades that followed, I often wondered if I'd honored my promise or if the culture of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces had stolen my soul. Like Senator McSally, who commissioned a few months before me, I was sexually assaulted on active duty. Like her, I did not report the assault. And like her—like almost every military woman of our generation, if we're being honest—I was complicit in a culture that enabled systemic misogyny and abuse.

Two: Assault

Unlike Senator McSally, I was not raped. My assailant was not senior to me. He was a foreign midshipman and I was a lieutenant, three paygrades senior to him.

The midshipman was a foot taller and at least fifty pounds heavier than me. He drank enough at a shipboard dining-in to imagine that I was interested and he was desirable. He followed me to my stateroom, pulled me inside, slid the pocket door shut, and grabbed me in a nonconsensual liplock. I waltzed him around until I could push the door open, and tossed him out so hard that he bounced off the steel bulkhead on the other side of the passageway.

I didn't report him. In the summer of 1994, the first women to be permanently assigned to American naval combatants had just been ordered to their ships. I didn't want my experience to be used as an argument that women didn't belong at sea. The midshipman, like many of the men who harass and assault military women, was technically proficient and behaved professionally when he was sober. His entire career lay ahead of him, and he had potential to contribute to the defense of his nation and to our alliance. Most importantly, I didn't want to tarnish the success of a joint mission with an important ally, or diminish my own contribution to it. Like all good military personnel, I prioritized mission accomplishment over personal inconvenience.

And by the time I was assaulted, I'd been groomed to accept abuse and to remain silent about it.

Three: Grooming

Military culture grooms women in uniform for abuse like a perpetrator of domestic violence grooms a partner for victimization. Military women are too often isolated from each other, desensitized to sexual aggression, encouraged to accept abuse of power as the norm, rewarded for compliance, and then silenced if they dare to object. Commanders would consider those behaviors unacceptable and inexcusable if they occurred in

any other criminal offense against another servicemember.

Military culture mixes rewards—camaraderie, a sense of belonging, the right to see oneself as successful and strong—with elements of abuse. The grooming process isn't linear. The techniques of desensitization vary, but they're familiar to anyone knowledgeable about domestic violence and sexual assault.

Grooming often begins in accession training.

I met my first military sexual predator at Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Our first eight weeks of training included a class in maneuvering board, a system of solving relative motion problems graphically and mathematically. The instructor, a chief boatswain's mate, made no secret of his contempt for women. We were of no use in his man's Navy; women's sole purpose was gratification of male sexual desire.

Another officer candidate, a prior enlisted woman who'd served as an operations specialist on an oiler, whispered to me in the passageway outside of the classroom that the best way to handle him was not to draw his attention. *Don't ever get caught alone in a classroom or deserted passageway with him*, she said. She didn't need to say *Don't bother reporting him*. He was still an instructor: one needed to know only that to read between

the lines. I'd survived a violent sexual assault two years before I joined the Navy; I was so uncomfortable around that chief that I choked on the final maneuvering board exam and failed it.

The cadre brought me before a board to discuss whether I should repeat just the exam or the entire first eight weeks of training. I claimed that a relapse of bronchitis kept me up all night before the test, and showed them that I could estimate a target angle—a basic maneuvering board skill—using the photo of a destroyer on the wall. They allowed me to retake the exam. A different instructor proctored it; I passed easily.

I assumed that the horny chief was an outlier. Some of the men in my class didn't exactly approve of my presence, but none of them behaved unprofessionally. Listening to women in the know and avoiding the occasional bad apple seemed to be reasonable strategies for sexual assault prevention—which I understood to be my individual, personal responsibility. I didn't realize how many bad apples were in the barrel; that a network of street-savvy, collegial women didn't exist everywhere in the Fleet; or that some men worked hard to prevent women from trusting each other and sharing information.

Several months

later, I attended the Intelligence Officer Basic Course in Dam Neck, Virginia.

The only other woman in my class of twenty had a girly-girl name and an open,

friendly smile. She spent Friday and Saturday nights at the officers' club at Naval

Air Station Oceana, home to hundreds of Navy fighter pilots.

Our male

classmates told me, *She's always talking*

about the pilots who take her out to dinner: where they go, what they eat, and

how much they spend on her. She's just

in the Navy to find a husband. And if

you pal around with her, people will think you're fucking every pilot at Oceana

too. You're a professional, though,

aren't you? You're one of the good ones.

It didn't take

long to figure out that sailors laud promiscuity among men and loathe it among

women. I learned never to use the phrase "double standard" to describe this

phenomenon; every man who heard it changed the subject to complain about gender

differences in scoring on the physical fitness test.

I wanted the

men I worked with to consider me one of the *good*

ones, even if it meant being judgmental about another woman's love life, isolated

from other women, and often lonely. I stayed cool and distant around the other

woman in my class. She showed even less interest in getting acquainted. I

wonder now what our classmates told her about me.

In December 1989, I reported to my first duty station at the Antisubmarine Warfare Operations Center (ASWOC) at Lajes, a village on the island of Terceira in the Azores archipelago. I was one of two women naval officers in the command; both of us were young, junior in rank, and single. The command's mission, straight out of *The Hunt for Red October*, was to locate and track Soviet submarines transiting the central Atlantic using P-3C Orion aircraft.

In addition to serving as the station intelligence officer for two years, I was to earn qualifications to be responsible for the safety of the aircraft in flight, and to debrief the missions and report submarine contacts back to intelligence and antisubmarine warfare headquarters commands in Norfolk, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Although 10 USC § 6015 still prohibited women from flying combat aircraft in 1989, the P-3C community had accepted women in support roles for several years and was considered to be less aggressive and hostile toward women than the carrier aviation community.

The first person I met at the ASWOC was a Limited Duty Officer ensign, formerly a senior enlisted man. He shook my hand and asked, "Are you going to be like our last female intel officer, and sleep with the commanding officer of every squadron who comes through?"

By then I'd

learned the value of a snappy comeback. I batted my eyelashes at him and simpered. "Why—I don't know! Do you think that's a good idea?" Then I turned away and walked past him as if he didn't exist.

Later he and some of the other watch officers introduced me to that day's duty air crew. "I'm Lieutenant N-.," said a grinning pilot. "the plane commander for Crew Six. Are you like our intel officer? She only sleeps with O-4s and up."

I shook my head and stomped my foot a couple of times like a Navy instructor who wants students to remember something important for an upcoming test.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I am not out here to get laid. I'm out here to catch Soviet submarines. When's the next mission?"

First assignments in the Navy are, as the saying goes, "like drinking from a fire hose." I told myself that I had no energy for sneaking around and no time to be lonely. And since the men I worked with apparently had the right to police my relationships, I decided that dating and sex were out of the question altogether for the next two years. I earned my qualifications as fast as I could, stood my watches, and learned to write intelligence reports and personnel evaluations. I dated one man, an Air Force logistics officer, in the last few

months of that assignment.



One of the P-3C crews deployed to Bell's first duty station let her fly the plane for 15 minutes—with the mission commander in the copilot seat, and the vertical autopilot on. Said Bell, "I'd have stayed in that seat the whole mission, if they'd let me."

Women could fly

on P-3C missions as long as the crew wasn't expected to drop torpedoes on an

enemy submarine. My supervisor in Lajes, the operations

officer, wanted me to fly as often as I could. For my first flight, the detachment officer in charge assigned me to ride with a crew that always read the same excerpt from a fifty-cent book of pornography aloud after they completed the preflight checklist. While the plane commander chanted a graphic sex scene, I tried not to think about the implications of being locked in a flying tin can for the next ten hours with a dozen men who'd just gotten themselves all hot and bothered. I refused to look down, and attempted to make eye contact with every member of the crew. Some wouldn't meet my gaze. Others squirmed and looked away.

One asked quietly afterwards if their reading had bothered me. I smiled and said, "The bodice-rippers I read are hotter than your crew's shitty porn."

I didn't complain. If women wanted respect, we had to act tough and never, ever spoil the guys' fun. The crew's porn ritual, just words, didn't hurt me. Acting tough and depriving bullies of their fun generated a lovely dopamine rush. I refused to think too hard about the effects of accepting bully behavior as the norm.

On another day, a pilot invited me to the hangar to learn about the squadron duty officers' responsibilities. When I arrived, he and another lieutenant called me into the squadron

duty office and told me to shut the door. On the back of the door, they'd hung a *Penthouse* centerfold of a naked blonde (I am also blonde) sitting in a spread-eagle split. My face was exactly level with her crotch. I could count her short-and-curlies. Suppressed snickers confirmed that the placement had been deliberate.

Looking the poster up and down slowly, I considered the options. If I complained, every man in the command would label me a "bitch" and a "whiner." If I ignored the behavior it might stop—or the aviators might choose to escalate the harassment in hopes of getting a reaction. If I pretended that the prank was no big deal or made a joke of it, I might convince them to think twice about messing with me. I might even win their approval.

I turned to the smirking lieutenants, shrugged, and pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the poster's focal point. "I think she dyes *that*, too."

When I left, I waved cheerily at the centerfold. We had something in common, but for years I didn't want to think about what it might be. Many of the strategies women use to access and retain some of the power men try to exercise over us and over our bodies become maladaptive. Even damaging.



When Bell commissioned, she had little idea that her career in the Navy would, at times, resemble a gauntlet of sexual advances by superiors, peers, and subordinates. In spite of this, she was able to maintain her faith in the United States, and confidence in her mission.

Over the

course of the two-year assignment to Lajes, three of my married colleagues

propositioned me. Each time I declined: *Flattered,*

but not interested. They accepted the

rejections with grace; I had no problems continuing to work with them.

I never told anyone about the propositions. Certainly not the married colleagues' wives, who already suspected me of sleeping with their husbands—or trying to—just because we worked and traveled together.

In a “he said, she said” situation, either the men or their wives might accuse me of having invited the propositions, or accused me of sleeping with a married man—conduct “prejudicial to good order and discipline” and a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I told myself that I had too much self-respect to hook up with guys who cheated, and that I deserved better. I allowed myself to feel morally superior to my colleagues, and to pity their wives.

But I never learned to feel comfortable with the old Navy adage about detached service, *What goes on det, stays on det*. Officers are supposed to follow a code of honor and report violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Every time I lied by omission, I felt like I'd ripped off another piece of my integrity and flushed it down the shitter.

For weeks before the summer antisubmarine warfare conference, held that year in Lajes, the only other single woman officer in the command (the administrative officer) and I endured repeated badgering from the executive officer and my supervisor, the operations officer, about who our “significant others” would be for the Saturday night dining-out event at a

local seafood restaurant. The executive officer wasn't satisfied when we told him we were going stag. Practically licking his lips at the picture of two young women paired with two hot-to-trot pilots, he ordered us both to bring significant others to the dinner.

At the Friday night reception, the admin officer and I cornered the two admirals attending the conference. We explained the situation, and asked them to be our dates for the dining-out. One had to depart for a family emergency, but we picked up the other from the VIP Quarters, stuffed him into the admin officer's little two-cylinder hatchback for the drive out to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and arrived at the restaurant a few minutes late.

We made a grand entrance on the admiral's arm and announced: "XO! OPSO! You ordered us to bring significant others to the dining-out. We're high achievers, so we brought the most *significant* other we could find. Will this one do, gentlemen?"

Everyone laughed but our supervisors, who turned bright red. They left our love lives alone after that.

The master's tools might not have brought down the master's house, but taking a whack with them from the inside and knocking down a little plaster afforded us the illusion of success.



Bell's solo campsite on the summit of Serra da Santa Barbara, Azores, July 1990, looking north across the caldera. Her military experience was not unpleasant, but it was, by necessity, more solitary than that of her many male peers.

In the summer

of 1990, a married pilot deployed to Lajes heard that I planned to go camping

on Serra de Santa Bárbara, the crest of Terceira's largest extinct volcano. He

invited himself to go with me. He insisted that he would join me even after I

told him several times that he wasn't welcome.

I didn't complain,

but my fellow watch officers overheard him and offered to straighten him out if

he was scaring me.

I thanked them,

but told them I could handle it. *If the*

pilot gets anywhere near the top of my volcano, I said, I'll just push him off the side of the mountain

and watch him die. With pleasure. I meant it literally.

I went camping
alone and kept watch on the one-lane road up the mountain
until sunset. Not
even a Navy pilot would risk the hairpin turns with no guard
rails, the
three-thousand-foot plunge to the sea. The pilot never showed.
I slept
fitfully.

I told my
colleagues that I'd managed the situation and enjoyed the
campout.

Not all
empowerment stories are true. Mine wasn't. But I told it so
many times that I
began to believe it. *Fake it 'til you
make it.*

A naval flight officer, a lieutenant commander known for
harassing women—especially enlisted women—returned to Lajes
for a second deployment.

Both the watch
officers and the enlisted sonar technicians assured the women
in the command
that they wouldn't leave any of us alone with him. The sonar
techs wouldn't
even go behind the sonar equipment racks if I sat at the
debriefing table with the
lieutenant commander.

During one
mission debrief, he put his hand over mine and leered at me.
Every enlisted man
in the room stopped working to glare at him.

I didn't smile. His hand, I moved firmly off my body and out of my personal space. Then, with eye contact and a facial expression, I indicated that he'd better not do it again. He shrugged and grinned: *Can't blame a guy for trying*. I didn't report him.

The next day, the operations officer—the supervisor who'd teased me about bringing a “significant other” to the dining-out—called me into his office. The sailors had told him about the handsy lieutenant commander. He asked why I hadn't reported it. He'd already arranged for the squadron's commanding officer to put the lieutenant commander on the first flight back to Rota. He insisted that he would never tolerate sexual harassment.

I pretended to see no irony in his statement. I considered myself lucky to work with men who were pranksters and occasionally bullies instead of rapists. I wondered what would happen to the women at the antisubmarine warfare operations center in Rota, and what might already have happened to the women in the deployed squadron. I didn't wonder too long: they weren't in my chain of command.

I'd completed the qualification process for “handling it.”

Four: Silence

In 1991, the same year I began congratulating myself for being tough enough to handle

military misogyny, Navy helicopter pilot Paula Coughlin reported sexual assault and misconduct at the naval aviation community's "Tailhook" professional conference. I admired her courage in speaking up, and saw her as a role model.

The Navy had one more lesson to teach.

In her essay "Cassandra Among the Creeps," Rebecca Solnit describes concentric rings of silence, through which women who dare to speak up against powerful men descend. Navy women watched Paula Coughlin descend, and we learned.

Almost immediately, most Navy men—even the Naval Investigative Service personnel charged with investigating the allegations—either dismissed Coughlin's story or attempted to discredit it.

Then they began to discredit Coughlin herself. The Navy grounded her and questioned her mental health. Suddenly, everybody knew somebody who'd known her: in ROTC at Old Dominion, at flight school, in the squadron, on the staff. They said she was brash, foul-mouthed, promiscuous (why else would she have gone to Tailhook in the first place?), and a shitty pilot. Claiming that she hadn't earned the honor of being an admiral's aide, those same men reasoned that the job had been given to her at better pilots' expense because the Navy was pushing to integrate more women into naval aviation. That was the first year I heard the term "political correctness."

Speaking up in Coughlin's defense was a one-way ticket down to the next level of silence: bullying and intimidation. *Are you one of those feminazis like Pat Schroeder? It takes a special kind of man to be a Navy pilot—what happened at Tailhook's just the culture in naval aviation. Do you think this*

investigation will actually change anything? Coughlin's career is toast, whether or not she wins her case. And the witch hunt is ruining the careers of good aviators who cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars to train. Would you ruin a man's career over something like that? It's not like she was raped or anything.

I disagreed.

Aw, we thought you were one of the good ones, Lieutenant.

Lesson learned: no woman would be awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on the sexual assault grenade.

Coughlin resigned her commission in the Navy. I decided to stay, took another big gulp of the Kool-Aid, and jumped feet-first down to the bottom of the pit. The need for silence, I internalized as a personal survival strategy. I didn't speak up in support of Coughlin again. Women who challenged military bullies and predators risked criticism, ostracism, lower marks on performance evaluations, or trumped-up misconduct charges that could lead to discharge from the service—even dishonorable discharge. Few senior women were around to serve as role models or mentors; those who would discuss sexual harassment advised us to keep our heads down and pick our battles. We couldn't rely on women who agreed with us in private to stand with us in public. Men were even less likely to offer support.

In 2005, my graduate fiction advisor suggested that I write stories from the perspective of women in uniform. "Military women don't ever tell those stories," I replied. "That would just make things worse for every woman still serving." That had been my lived experience, and I believed every word when I said it. I didn't start writing about the Navy for almost another decade.

Five: Barriers

Senator McSally needed years to decide to break her silence about her assault. Many of us do. If you'd asked me when I retired in 2008 if I'd been sexually assaulted on active duty, I'd have said no: I'd handled the incident with the handsy midshipman and moved on. Senator McSally may have thought she'd handled her sexual assault, too.

An admission of complicity in the culture that permits and encourages gender and sexual violence in the armed forces, and the realization that there is no contradiction in being both the victim of abuse and an enabler of it, can take much longer. Responsibility for sexual harassment and assault in the military rests squarely and solely on the shoulders of the perpetrators; staying silent to survive, or to remain employed, in no way equals consent to being assaulted. But men and women who served and are still serving bear the responsibility for tolerating and perpetuating an abusive culture that creates conditions in which sexual assault can occur more frequently, in which victims who come forward are routinely silenced, and in which those who courageously insist on being heard are denied justice.

Complicity costs us a fortune in integrity. Worse, when we fail to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which we individually enable toxicity in the culture, we pass some of the cost on to other victims. Military sexual trauma factors significantly in

depression for many veterans, female and male. It's a risk factor for substance abuse and homelessness. It's almost certainly implicated in the suicide rate of women veterans (250 times the national average for women). Complicity allows the culture of gender and sexual violence in the armed forces to appropriate our souls—or to steal them outright.

Audre Lorde wrote in her final book *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*: "While we fortify ourselves with visions of the future, we must arm ourselves with accurate perceptions of the barriers between us and that future." Visions of an armed force in which gender and sexual violence is prevented to the extent possible, and properly addressed when it occurs, must begin with accurate perception. This begins with an understanding of how the culture of sexual harassment and sexual assault functions in the armed forces. It's a slippery slope that leads from inappropriate stressors in training, to the acceptance of gender-based harassment and sexual abuse as norms. Military leaders must also develop an accurate perception of how toleration of sexual harassment and assault, and silence about it, have for too long been the price of approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege in the armed forces, especially for women.

Senator McSally's task force will need to develop accurate perceptions of the systemic barriers to reducing gender and sexual violence in the armed forces. Department of Defense leaders resistant to change and jealous of their authority, and conservative pundits with an antiquated understanding of strength and of sexual violence, will likely attempt to reward the task force for tolerance of the status quo and continued

complicity in the culture of harassment and assault. Members of the task force, and Senator McSally, must refuse to allow their integrity to become the price for approval, acceptance, camaraderie, and privilege. I wish Senator McSally and her task force all success in tackling the challenges of sexual harassment and assault in the armed forces, and welcome her, with sadness and regret, to the circle of those who have finally found the courage to break our silence.

Jerri Bell is the Managing Editor for O-Dark-Thirty, the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008; her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands, sea duty on USS Mount Whitney and HMS Sheffield, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia. She also served in collateral assignments as a Navy Family Advocacy Program Officer, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program Officer, and sexual assault victim advocate. Her fiction has been published in a variety of journals and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize; her nonfiction has been published in newspapers, including the Washington Post and the Charleston Gazette-Mail; in journals; and on blogs. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.

An Interview with Helen

Benedict, Author of WOLF SEASON

Helen Benedict is the author of seven novels, five books of nonfiction, and a play. Her most recent novel, WOLF SEASON, is this month's fiction selection on The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

WOLF SEASON "follows the war home," as a starred review in *Library Journal* puts it, examining war's reverberations on the lives of three women and their families. There is an Iraq war veteran named Rin, who keeps three wolves from a pack she started on her land with her late husband; she is raising a daughter who was born blind, perhaps from lingering effects of Rin's service. There's Naema, a widowed Iraqi doctor who has come to the U.S. with her son. And there is Beth, a Marine wife raising a troubled son, who awaits her husband's return from Afghanistan even as she fears it.

Helen was generous enough to take the time to speak to me about WOLF SEASON, war, writing, the strengths of fiction vs. nonfiction to speak to specific themes, Charlottesville, and more.

The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Helen, you've said that your newest novel, WOLF SEASON, is about "the long reach of war." Can you tell me a little more about that?

Helen Benedict: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have affected all of us in America, whether we know it or not. Our morality, our politics, our pocketbooks – all have been profoundly changed. But, of course, the most affected are those who have either served or suffered in those wars, and those who love them. Of the women in WOLF SEASON, Rin is a veteran of the Iraq War, Naema is an Iraqi refugee, and Beth is married to a marine deployed to Afghanistan. All three women are raising their children alone because of the fallout of war. Of the men

in the novel, Louis is also a veteran, Todd the marine, and they, too, are profoundly affected by their experiences of war. The characters in WOLF SEASON personify the ways that war has permeated the little town of Huntsville, NY, the people who live there, and, in a sense, us all.

But I don't want to characterize WOLF SEASON as purely a war book, for it is just as much about tenderness, love, and hope. It is also about the way human beings can rise above through horror and trauma to find and help one another, even when the odds are against them.

WBT: To which character in WOLF SEASON do you hope readers will feel most attached?

HB: I hope that all my characters are compelling in their own ways, but I suspect the answer to this has more to do with who a reader is than anything else. Already, I have heard a full range of reactions to the characters in WOLF SEASON: some readers like the women best, others the children, while yet others especially love the wolves, and some relate most to the men. One of the aspects of writing I love the most is seeing how varied the reactions of readers are, and how everyone brings their own interpretations to a book that can be quite independent from mine.



WBT: Helen, I've read that you grew up living all over the world, on islands in the Indian Ocean; in Berkeley, CA; and in England. You've said that during your years of island living you did not attend school and were allowed to "run wild," and I was instantly reminded of Margaret Atwood's youth, and her wild-and-free summers in remote camp sites with her entomologist father, her mom, and her brother.

Do you think the period of free time you experienced had an effect on your imagination, or somehow helped foster a

writerly way of thinking?

HB: Yes! Largely because of these travels, I spent a lot of time alone as a child, so learned to read early and took comfort in books. I was an addicted reader by the age of six or seven, so much so that I'd be heartbroken when a book ended. Then I discovered I could continue the magic by writing myself.

I also learned about poverty and suffering by living on those islands, which were poor and disease-ridden at the time. Even at the age of three, I was profoundly saddened by seeing starving children and people living in shacks. Children understand these things much more deeply than we adults realize.

WBT: With such an international childhood and youth, how did the issues facing women in the American military first come onto your radar? Your nonfiction book, *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, was the first book I read by an academic discussing female service members; if it was not the first, then at least it was the first one I heard of, with the largest impact and starting the most national discussion. Most academics I know, at least in my experience, rarely think about the military at all. What brought you to this topic, and with such conviction that you've continued to address it across at least three books?

HB: I am not really an academic, but a journalist and a novelist who happens to teach. The research I did for *THE LONELY SOLDIER*, which was indeed the first book to look at women who served in the post-9/11 wars, was essential not only for my journalistic work, but for my related novels, *SAND QUEEN* and *WOLF SEASON*. Over a stretch of more than three years, I interviewed some 40 women veterans of the Iraq War, and then later I also interviewed Iraqi refugees. These interviews, along with other research, informed my imagination, allowing me to plunge deep into the interior lives of refugees and soldiers to create my fictional

characters; something I would never have dared do had I not spent so long listening to real people.

As for why I came to this topic, I'll start by saying that all my work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has looked at the powerless and the outsider, and much of it has especially focused on women. When I saw the U.S. invade Iraq for no reason and learned of the destruction and death we caused there as a result; and then also learned about the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the moral injury that the war was causing to women and men, I had to write about it. I care passionately about justice, and the right of the oppressed to be heard.

As for why I turned from journalism to fiction – from *THE LONELY SOLDIER* to my novels, *SAND QUEEN* and *WOLF SEASON* – that is because I wanted to get to what war does to our interior lives, our hearts, our morals, our souls, our minds. That is the territory of fiction.



WBT: I first read *THE LONELY SOLDIER* as a relatively new officer's-wife, and to be quite honest, felt like I went through several stages of grief while reading. It was difficult to reconcile my husband's recent, major life decision, and his well-intentioned enthusiasm for it, with the

book's description of the military as based on a model of predation, and occupied by, in essence, various levels of predators very graphically rendered (recruiters who force teenage girls, for example, to give them head in parked cars). It was also difficult to consider our family's new path from the perspective of my conviction that I was a feminist, with a deep concern for other women. How had I not known this was happening to female service members? I remember the striking detail that the women profiled in the book asked to use their real names, as a way of "fighting back." THE LONELY SOLDIER was the first step in a long and rather painful exposure of, what may not necessarily be my experience with the military, but what is the truth for many women.

I guess my question here is one that's bothered me to some degree for more than thirteen years: Do you feel that a person whose life work is spent within an institution like the U.S. military has chosen, in effect, to side with an oppressive regime? Is it possible to still be an ally to others, those often ignored or hurt by war and by institutionalized racism, sexism, and violence?

HB: I think this is a brave question, and in a way, my answer lies in WOLF SEASON, as well as my other related books, because my veteran characters are all struggling with questions like yours, especially how to push back against injustice and wrongdoing within the military, and how to feel like a good person when you have come to feel you were used to do wrong.

My veteran characters have been distorted by war and its inherent injustices, yes, but they also want to love, mend, and amend. This is the essential struggle in the aftermath of war for us all – how, having done a great wrong, we can grope our way back to doing some right.

Another path, and I do see veterans doing this, is to help the real victims of our wars: the innocent Iraqi citizens whose

lives we have destroyed. This, too, is a theme in WOLF SEASON.

But going back to the earlier part of your question, yes, I do think that joining the military is to give yourself to an institution that usually causes more harm than good. But that said, I also think it's important to fight wrongdoing from the inside. Part of our duty as citizens of a democracy is to hold governmental institutions accountable when they go wrong, and to expose and fight and correct that wrong wherever we can. I know how much courage it takes the military from within, but I've seen active duty service members and veterans do it, and I admire them deeply.

WBT: You were in Charlottesville, VA, during the horrifying neo-Nazi rally this past August. How did you end up there at that time, and what did you observe, on the ground? What, for you, did that event say about America circa 2017-18?

HB: [I have written](#) about that terrible day in Charlottesville before, so all I'll say here is that I was at an artist's residency nearby, so went to bear witness and counter-protest. The main point I made in this essay is that, as a writer and reader, I know that using one's imagination to put oneself in the shoes of others is the key to empathy and compassion. The racists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites who attended the rally that day refused to use their imaginations to do any such thing, thus freeing themselves to dehumanize the people they wished to hate. It was a sickening sight to behold, the screaming red faces of those who relish hatred; the opposite of what writers and artists stand for.

WBT: You've addressed themes of systemic violence through both fiction and nonfiction. How do you feel these genres are uniquely suited to addressing political issues?

HB: Nonfiction explains it, fiction explores it. In WOLF SEASON, as in any novel, I was able to plunge into a character's heart to show how it really feels to be the victim

or the perpetrator or violence, and what that does to the human soul. The field of fiction is the human interior – our hearts, our minds, our morals. I love that. That’s why I read novels, and that’s why I write them.

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WOLF SEASON is available from [Bellevue Literary Press](#) or wherever books are [sold](#). A reading group guide is available for download [here](#). You can find out more about Helen Benedict’s writing on her [web site](#).