

# New Nonfiction by David Chrisinger: “Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor’s Guide to Writing about Trauma”



*The following is an excerpt from David Chrisinger’s new book, [Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor’s Guide to Writing About Trauma](#) (Johns Hopkins University Press, July 2021). In this section, Chrisinger has embarked on a canoe trip with author, veteran, and EOD specialist Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk*, *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, *Disappointment River*, and *Stampede!: Gold Fever and Disaster in the Klondike*.*

Brian’s goal for day four was to snake through a series of small islands to where the Mackenzie River widened into Mills Lake. According to the guidebook, it wasn’t uncommon for canoeists to get stranded on Mills Lake for a day or two. The lake is so shallow that when the wind picks up just a little, whitecaps can whip up and make it impossible to keep going.

Much to our surprise and delight, the water in Mills Lake was flat and calm, not a whitecap to be seen. The sky was a brilliant blue, so blue in fact that could I have dipped my hand into it, my gloved fingers would have come back wet with paint. I’m not much of a churchgoer, but the landscape that day stirred something spiritual in me. To the north there no longer seemed to be any sort of horizon. There was only a majestic blue panorama of sky and water, a near-perfect mirror that reflected all that was beautiful and calming about this place. Instead of stopping for the day as Brian had originally planned, we skirted the southern shore without any trouble from wind or waves, feeling fortunate for the first time all

week. From the back of the canoe, I steered us from point to point along the shore, careful not to get too far from land.

Brian's back was starting to bother him, he said, and his shoulders were stiff and sore from all the paddling. Each time he pinched his shoulder blades together or arched the small of his back, I could hear the pops and groans of his battered body. I was then suddenly aware of Brian's intense need for dedicated quiet, a quiet I don't think I've ever experienced with another human being. I became self-conscious of all the questions I had been asking him about writing and being an author and whatever else my curiosity suggested.

For the first time all week, I went nearly an hour in the canoe without saying a word. Before too long, the pent-up anxiety, now released, paired with general exhaustion, the rhythmic nature of my paddle stroke, and the sound of the canoe cutting through the water all resulted in a meditative calm that eventually ended with my head slumping forward and then suddenly jerking back. Not wanting to fall fast asleep and go over the side of the canoe, I did the only thing I thought would keep me awake: I talked. Because Brian had cut me off the last time I brought it up, I started with my trip to Okinawa, not caring if Brian was listening or not. Simply saying my thoughts out loud, I convinced myself, would help me make sense of them. If Brian added his two cents, that would simply be icing on the cake. I talked about what a strange place Okinawa was and how commercial and developed it had become. Brian said he was surprised I had brought Ashley with me. He said that he'd never thought to include his wife on a research or writing trip but that she would probably be overjoyed to be asked. "My wife's love language is quality time," I said, citing the insights of *The Five Love Languages*. "Mine, too," Brian said in a soft, contemplative tone.

As though I had rehearsed what I would say if finally given the opportunity to speak, I found a nice, unstrained rhythm of play-by-play recounting. The highlight of the trip, I told

Brian, was the second-to- last day, when Ashley and I met up with American expat Jack Letscher, who worked in his spare time as a battlefield historian. The morning we met him at our hotel, he handed me a short stack of photocopied topographical maps that were divided into neat grids and further divided into smaller squares. Certain squares on each page were highlighted, and he explained that he'd taken records of my grandfather's company and traced the routes the men had taken and the places they had fought onto the copies of the battlefield maps I now held in my hand. For the next eight hours or so, he took us along the same routes in the same order that my grandfather's company had once traversed. Brian listened without interrupting or asking questions. Then I told him about my father and what a difficult relationship I had with him and how my journey to uncover the truth and write a book about his father was a sort of pilgrimage I had created for myself to bring my father some peace.

"Like Field of Dreams," Brian said.

"Yeah, I guess. I never thought about it like that," I said, thinking of the 1989 movie starring Kevin Costner in which a farmer in Iowa builds a baseball field at the edge of his cornfield to ease his long-dead father's pain.

"You know, though," Brian continued, "it wasn't his father who needed peace. It was Costner."

"That's true."

"Do you want some advice?" he asked, as if he had finally realized that is all I wanted all along. "You need to figure out what peace you were looking for," he said.

"Okay," I said and thought for a moment. "I guess I don't know exactly."

"Figure that out, and you'll have yourself a book," Brian said with a candid authority for which I held a respectful

appreciation.

Finally I was getting what I wanted, what I had been waiting for. Yes, I'd sat on a plane for two days and flew 4,000 miles from home to the Arctic to escape some of the drama of my life and recharge whatever batteries I had left, and, yes, I'd thought I would be able to help a hero of mine in a time of need, but really what I was looking for was his advice.

I thought for a moment about what peace I was looking for. Then Brian interjected another thought: "Unless you know what you, as the writer and as one of the main characters, actually wants, all you're going to have is a bunch of pages where a bunch of stuff happens, but none of it matters because that's all it is—just a bunch of stuff a reader has no particular reason to care about."

Then he asked me something I hadn't anticipated: "Why do you want to be a full-time author anyway? You've put out a couple books already. Clearly your job isn't so demanding that you don't have the time or energy to work on stuff that's important to you. Plus, I bet your pay and benefits are good."

"And I have a pension," I added.

"Shit," he said, adjusting the brim of his hat between paddle strokes. "If I had flexibility and time and a salary and benefits and a pension, I wouldn't be out here for 40 days—away from my wife and kids—trying to scrape up enough material to fill a book no one's going to remember after I'm dead and gone."

"How can you say that?" I asked incredulously.

"Tell me this," he continued, ignoring my question. "Why do you really want to write this book? You writing a book isn't going to bring your father any peace; you could just tell him what you found if that's all you want."

"I suppose it's like what Twain said. If you want to be remembered, you either have to write a book or do something worth writing a book about."

"Unless your last name is Washington or Lincoln," Brian replied, "no one's going to remember you a generation or two after you're gone. No book is going to change that." He continued, "This life ain't all it's cracked up to be. Believe me."

"Well," I said, "if you think what I have is so great, you should apply. We're trying to fill like six of my positions."

Later that day, over peanut butter and honey wraps and fruit, Brian confided in me that his first book had sold for big money. He said that he was almost embarrassed by how much and that he was never going to make back the advance he received. His second book, however, was rejected by the publisher who had bought his first one. The editor he worked with on *The Long Walk* told Brian that maybe he had only one book in him. "He said that Michael Herr only wrote one book too—*Dispatches*—and that I shouldn't be too hard on myself," Brian said.

"Man, what a dick," I replied with a mouth full of food.

"Yeah, but then that same guy is my editor for this book, so . . ." To sell his second book, Brian had completely restructured it.

Twice. I started to wonder whether Brian's experience with his second book was making him a better teacher of writing and whether he was practicing his chops on me. I've learned through my dealings in the writing world that good writers aren't always good teachers. Often the opposite is true because most people are better at teaching something they've learned through experience, through trial and error, than they are at teaching something they somehow innately know. When someone like Brian knows in his bones how to tell an intimate,

vulnerable personal story, it can be easy to assume anyone can do the same. The person just has to want it badly enough. Write a better book. It's that simple. The cognitive unconscious of natural writers has a knack for offering up beautiful prose in story form, affording them the rare ability to write automatically—so automatically that it's easy to believe that's the nature of writing itself, rather than simply their nature.

Natural storytellers aren't normally equipped with the tools to deconstruct what they've done or to pinpoint what it is that a reader will respond to—not until they get knocked on their ass and are forced to figure it out for themselves. Their debut books are beautiful and haunting and stick with you for days after you finish them. But because they can't put their finger on what made it so captivating, their second books can oftentimes fall flat in comparison.

The next available campsite was another 8 or 10 miles down the river, on the northern shore. There we found a perfect camping spot with plenty of breeze and very few mosquitos. The shore was sandy and full of seashells. Seagulls chatted in the background. The scenery reminded me of pictures I have seen of Alaska, the wide and long valleys that were carved out by glaciers and are now dotted with rocks and low bushes, a land teeming with wildlife. To the north of us, dark purple clouds fluffed by. An occasional lightning strike diverted my attention from the camp chores. They were close enough to see but far enough away not to worry about. To the west, the sun kissed the tops of the distant trees. Brian sat on a flat rock with his legs crossed, jotting notes in his journal as I pitched the tent and filled up our water bottles.

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# In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for

individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

## The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support “pre-emptive strikes” still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan’s sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush’s U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin’s Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community’s long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

## Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), “Generation War” follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to “Our Fathers, Our Mothers.” It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn’t fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany’s “Band of Brothers” is a dark anti-Epic that follows the

birth of modern  
Germany through  
the struggle of  
those citizens who  
were of fighting  
age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very

unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as “camp guards.” But this isn’t a Ukrainian version of WWII—it’s *German*. Didn’t Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there’s always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it’s not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there’s always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it’s either his job, or he’s a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren’t clean, either, regardless of Poland’s experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

# Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century might return as a Russian during the season that

deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.