

# New Fiction by Matthew J. Hefti: "Jean, not Jean"



Illustration by Matthew J. Hefti

# Jean, not Jean

by Matthew J. Hefti

When I look in the mirror, I think I look stupid. Otherwise, I don't even think of how I look. But when I do look in the mirror, it's like I can't look away. Also when I do, I pick a lot. Today is especially bad.

My mom said once that it's anxiety from stress.

My dad said, he's thirteen. What's he got to be stressed about?

I'm pretty torqued on the way to school. I don't really know why. I think it's because I missed the bus. I missed the bus because I couldn't stop picking at myself, and I think it's because I can feel everything—like how tight my socks are and how my feet are already a little moist and my socks aren't doing anything about it, and my shirt's a little tight in the armpits and it's pulling at my armpit hairs, and one of the hairs in my eyebrows is curled or something and it's really annoying me, and I think maybe I have a hair growing in my ear. I'm not sure.

My mom asks what she can do to put me in a better mood.

I tell her that she doesn't have to do anything.

She says my happiness is important.

It's important to you, I tell her.

Jean isn't at school today. He's probably my best friend. He had an allergic reaction yesterday. He's allergic to pretty much everything.

Mr. Rogers is subbing again because Mrs. Neumann is sick. Mr. Rogers hates when we call him that and tells us to call him anything but that. We called him all kinds of things for a while, like Mr. Fluffy Head and Poo Poo Bear, but it got boring because he really meant what he said about being able to call him anything. He didn't care.

You wouldn't guess it by his name, but Mr. Rogers is this tough looking dude that used to be in the military. He still has a flat top.

Mr. Rogers calls Jean's name three times, pausing for infinity each time as if it's not completely obvious there's an empty desk and no one is responding. But he says it like Jean, like something you wear or like he's a girl, but his name is Jean, like Victor Hugo's hero. It rhymes with Shawn. You'd think he'd know that by now.

I've never read anything by Victor Hugo, but that's what Jean's mother always says when someone says it wrong: It's Jean, she says. Like the greatest hero in western literature, drawn in full by Victor Hugo. Except she says litra-ture. And then if people say, who's that, she won't answer. She just snorts a little like they're stupid.

I asked his mom once if I could see the picture of the Jean in the book. She said, What do you mean? I said, the one drawn by Victor Hugo. She snorted. I guess she thinks I'm stupid.

Jean told me that his mom named him that because the Jean in the book is like a kind of Christ.

I asked him what that was supposed to mean since there's only one God.

He said, he's not Christ. He's a type of Christ.

I said, you can't be a type of something if there's only one of that thing.

He said he asked his dad about it once and his dad said that the only thing he's the hero of is the miserable ones.

Who? I said. Jean or Christ?

Jean shrugged. Both I guess.

I used to call him Jean too. Even though it's Jean, not Jean. Everyone did. He's small and kind of nerdy looking. Plus he's sick a lot, and saying Jean made us feel stuck up. But now most of us have gotten used to it. It's just his name.

I didn't call him Jean because he was nerdy. I called him that because he was my arch nemesis. He stole my job as milk monitor last year, when we were in sixth grade. Each of us had a class duty, and I had the best one.

It wasn't the best because counting the orders and getting the milks at lunch was so great or anything. But the milk monitor for the fifth and sixth grade classroom had to go with the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth grade classroom. And Heather Saint James was the milk monitor for the seventh and eighth graders. Heather Saint James didn't have the prettiest face—that was Jennifer Gohrman—but she did have the biggest boobs in the school.

The way it worked was, the older kid would bring the milk

crate and wait by our door. That was like the signal to Mrs. Neumann that she needed to wrap it up. Then she'd say, raise your hand if you want chocolate. Then, raise your hand if you want white. You'd count the hands and then go to the gym closet with the older kid to get the milks, and then you'd bring them back.

Heather Saint James would put the milk crate on the ground to slide open the big fridge door to get the milks and put them into the crate.

I could see right down her shirt where those big heavy things were hanging. While she waited for me to stammer the count for our class, she would stay bent over like that with her hand on the bottom shelf. Like she didn't even realize they were there.

To get to the gym closet, you had to walk through the whole school and then finally the principal's office. You could go through the gym instead of the principal's office, but we weren't allowed to go that way.

When I was in fifth grade and David Pfeiffer was the milk monitor, I thought they made them go through the office because they were afraid the milk monitors would start playing in the gym on the way there. That was before Jean even went to our school.

But then when I got older, I realized that didn't make any sense because all the balls and toys and stuff were stored in the gym closet, which is where you had to go to get the milks anyway.

After I had spent some time as the milk monitor myself, I realized they made you go through the principal's office because they were probably afraid that if you went through the gym, you'd probably goof off in other ways. I never did

though.

Jean says I chickened out and had plenty of chances, but that's not what happened. What happened is that he stole my job.

One day while I was doing the sweater stare—it was fall by then—I had forgotten the count when Heather Saint James asked me the numbers. I thought fast and gave her two numbers that added up to eleven. That's how many students we had in our class after all.

But Jean doesn't drink milk. He's allergic. According to his mom, deathly allergic. So the real number was supposed to add up to ten.

I should have guessed that anyway because that's how many kids had been in my class my whole life until Jean showed up. But I remembered the new kid made us eleven.

It wasn't the first time I had gotten the numbers wrong. It wasn't even the first time I made the mistake of bringing back eleven milks. But the first time I did it doesn't count. I just did it that time because I thought that Mrs. Neumann would let me have the extra chocolate instead of taking it back.

She didn't like that.

I told her I couldn't take it back because Heather Saint James already went back to her classroom.

She told me that she was sure I would find my way. She was always saying that, even when it didn't make sense in context.

The time I forgot the numbers on accident, she asked why I brought back the wrong number of chocolate milks again.

I told her it was because I forgot Jean was allergic to milk.

She said, you know who won't forget that Jean is allergic to milk?

No, I told her.

Jean. That's who.

So she made Jean the milk monitor.

When I told my dad what happened, he laughed and said, Well, there's dramatic irony for you.

I was pretty mean to Jean for a while. Then one day he asked why I cared about being milk monitor so much, and I told him it was obvious.

He said it wasn't obvious to him.

I mentioned Heather Saint James.

He said, that's it? Then he claimed he didn't care about that because he could look at all the boobs he wanted because they had the internet at home. I think he just wanted me to like him.

He offered to stick his finger in one of the milk cartons so I could get the job back. I think he wanted to be liked so badly that he would have really done it, but I told him not to because they might give the job to anyone. And if someone else got the job, he'd just be risking his life for nothing.

It made me feel bad that he was so obsessed with being liked that he would risk his life to get a friend and also give up the chance to sneak peeks down the shirt of Heather Saint

James.

So I said sorry for being so mean and that I wouldn't view him as my arch nemesis anymore.

After me and Jean became friends, I asked him why he came to our school.

Jean said the public school told him he missed too many days. He didn't want to be stuck in fifth grade.

So I asked him why he could be in sixth grade in our school when everyone said it was harder than the public school.

He said the state couldn't tell our school what to do. Then he said our school was just as easy as public school. But going to any school is a waste of time, he said.

He had a point there.

When I asked him why he didn't just get home schooled, he said his mom told him that all home school kids are weird.

He had a point there too.

But why our school? I asked. You're not even Christian.

Yes I am, he said.

But you don't go to our church, I pointed out.

Are you stupid or just brainwashed? he asked.

I told him he could use some milk of human kindness.

We both had a good laugh at that one.

It was milk that gave Jean the reaction yesterday, but it

could have been anything considering practically half the normal foods in the world are like phosgene or mustard gas to him. I learned about phosgene and mustard gas yesterday in history class, not from Mr. Rogers, but from Jean.

When history class started, Mr. Rogers asked what we were learning about from Mrs. Neumann.

Jean told him World War One.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand and said, why do we always have to learn about wars in history class?

Mr. Rogers told her it was because wars were like the epicenter of an earthquake in a country's timeline with seismic waves moving out in every direction. If you wanted to, he said, you could pick any given war and study the whole country's history just by studying that war. You could ask yourself what led to the war and then what were the consequences of the war. By asking what led to the war, you could go as far back into history as you wanted. By asking what the consequences of the war were, you could study all the history from the war until the present and then as far into the future as infinity if you wanted.

Tabby Gardner told him we'd already been studying World War One for infinity.

I have to admit, I was pretty bored myself.

Well, Mr. Rogers said, if a war is like an earthquake in a country's timeline, then wouldn't a World War be like an earthquake in the entire world's timeline? So doesn't it make sense to spend time studying it?

Okay, Tabby Gardner said, but we already know everything about it.

Then tell me what you know about the war, Mr. Rogers said.

Jean raised his hand, like always.

Mr. Rogers said, I want to hear from Tabby. But then she didn't say anything for a long time, and Mr. Rogers called on Jean, like always.

Did you know, Jean said, that in World War One, they used phosgene and mustard gasses? Also, did you know that the Germans would hit troops with gasses that could get through the gas masks? It would hurt their eyes and nose and stuff so bad that they would take off their masks, even though that could kill them. Then after taking off their masks, they'd inhale the phosgene and mustard and stuff like that. Their lungs would start to blister and their eyes would bleed or they'd start coughing so bad they could puke up their stomachs and all sorts of stuff.

Tabby Gardner raised her hand.

Mr. Rogers called on her.

Real prissy she said, can we please not talk about blistered lungs and puked up stomachs?

You could tell Mr. Rogers was thinking about it because he didn't say anything for a while.

Then he said, so like I was saying before about the earthquakes, I actually know a guy who got messed up really bad—big red oozing blisters all over his body—after he put a mustard round in his truck thinking it was a regular old projo.

Then he told us all about IEDs made with chlorine tanks, stock piles of mustard rounds, troops that got gassed that couldn't get benefits once they got home, and how the whole reason we were there was because some General convinced the UN that there were WMDs there.

Jean ate it up. He loved that kind of stuff.

But what happened with the milk yesterday was, after history class we had lunch. I was reading the joke on my milk carton, and I said, I don't get it.

The jokes were like numbered in a series. Everyone with a number five, for example, would have the same stupid joke. An example would be, Why was the cow jumping up and down? Because it wanted a milkshake. But that wasn't the actual joke yesterday.

Mr. Rogers was at his desk eating his lunch and drinking his milks—he always ordered two chocolates. He asked me what number I had.

Twelve, I told him.

Me too, he said. It's a pun.

But I don't get it, I told him.

He said, you know back when I was in school, milk cartons didn't have jokes. They had pictures of missing kids.

But these have jokes, and I don't get this one.

Instead of jokes, we'd have to look at pictures of these kids who were abducted, he said.

Jean asked what the joke was.

Mr. Rogers said, it's not a joke. It's a pun.

Then Jean said, well then read me the pun.

Mr. Rogers said, you wouldn't get a pun like this if I told it to you. You have to read it.

I can't read it myself, Jean said. I'm allergic to milk.

When I was a kid, Mr. Rogers said, we didn't have all these

allergies either. All this helicopter parenting. Kids are too sheltered these days. Protected from everything so they can't handle anything.

I think Jean didn't want to look weak in front of Mr. Rogers. He grabbed my milk carton to look at it for himself. And I guess a little spilled on him or something because it wasn't long before he started turning red and wheezing and everything.

It's a good thing Mr. Rogers was subbing that day, because Mrs. Neumann probably would have freaked out. She's the nervous type, but Mr. Rogers has all that war training.

Mr. Rogers acted all calm like it was no big deal. He asked Jean if he had an EpiPen and where it was. It was in his desk, so Mr. Rogers grabbed it in no time and gave him the shot. Then he pointed at someone and said, you, go down the hall and have the secretary call 911. Then he pointed at me and said, you, go in the top pocket of my backpack by the right side of my desk. There's an EpiPen in there. Bring it to me.

In pretty much no time, the ambulance had come to take Jean to the hospital.

Mr. Rogers said it was just a precaution.

Jean loves Mr. Rogers. Every time he subs, Jean spends all recess talking to him, and Mr. Rogers doesn't seem to mind.

But today at morning recess, Mr. Rogers just stands at the corner of the soccer field with his hands in his pockets. He swings his foot back and forth like he's kicking apart an ant hill or something, but he does it the whole time. He never looks up at the kids to make sure we're not fighting or anything.

Mr. Rogers looks pretty lonely without Jean there. But before

recess is over, the principal comes out and says something to him. Mr. Rogers doesn't say anything back. He just goes inside early and the principal follows after him.

I asked Jean once why he wanted to waste all his recess time talking to the teacher about boring stuff like history.

He said we had to study history because those who don't study history will be doomed to repeat it.

Sounds like the opposite would make more sense. If you don't know about it, it would be pretty random to repeat it, which makes repeating it seem pretty unlikely.

I told him so, and he said we should ask Mr. Rogers what he thought.

I told Jean I'd just take his word for it.

But I guess Mr. Rogers is pretty lousy at the whole not repeating history thing. What I mean by that is, Mr. Rogers isn't in the classroom when we get back inside from recess. While we're all just waiting around, I hear Paisley Schmitt say they fired him because he was talking about bleeding eyeballs and coughed up stomachs during history class yesterday.

That makes sense coming from her.

I say that because the first time Mr. Rogers subbed for us, he told us not to ask if he killed anyone unless we wanted him to kill us. Then the principal made him apologize to the whole class after Paisley Schmidt narked on him to her mom.

And it's doubly believable because Mrs. Neumann shows back up, even though she still looks sick and sounds like she's going

to cough up her stomach.

I don't think Mr. Rogers is as great as Jean does, but I think he's okay. He says bad words sometimes when he's telling stories, and you don't often get to hear a teacher say swear words. It's easy to distract him and his stories are pretty good. Better than Mrs. Neumann's anyway.

But that's kind of just how he is. He'll talk to you like you're on the same level.

Like when he started his apology speech after Paisley Schmitt narked on him. He said, apparently, you're not supposed to talk about killing with middle schoolers. You could tell he thought the whole thing was stupid by the way he said apparently.

Me and Jean had a good laugh at that too.

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# **New Fiction from Ulf Pike: Son of God**

## **I. Esses**

The warmth of his voice makes us wary of his intentions. He bears our sin of greenness like a precious burden, our softness like a direct order from God to transform us in his image.

A helmet fits his skull like the mold from which it was cast.

When he removes it  
his bare head glistens in the sun. We pretend not to look, as though he were a woman undressing, feeling almost queasy waiting for him to put it back on. His skin is fair and something childish in his face does not relieve it of an old mortality, which is what one feels when caught in his stare. Under the kevlar brim crouches some secret in eyes, level as a landless horizon. He takes in the world as if in the path of some vast, righteous burning.

“Without death,” he tells us, “there could be no beauty.” Behind us in all directions, warping heat weaves the sky and earth together like two banners in a low wind. He continues, “They had to consume death to know how to live.”

Had we not been standing around the smoldering carnage of a recent Apache gunship engagement, talk might have remained speculative. The target was a small truck, now a skeletal remnant riddled with 30mm holes. We all lean on it and peer in. Of the reported three enemy kills, the charred remains of one are scattered in the bed. The way the body has come to rest, it looks as if his hand is trying to prevent more of his brains from spilling out. Esses fixes his eyes there while he removes one glove and probes gently around. He pulls at the partially coiled pink and black matter.

Standing at the tailgate he considers what he holds between his fingers like a sacrament.

He looks up, holds each of us in his gaze, searching our eyes as if for the words he wants to say.

He speaks warmly: “Even the light of a dead star can guide us.” He smiles, pleased by his own insight. He says, “The past is always present but never as it was.” Then extending his hand: “Memory comes back in pieces, some of them not our own.”

## II. Chrysalis

Upstream, an elk lowers his velvet crown to drink. A sudden gust tears a flurry of leaves from their branches and they flutter to the current like butterflies. He remembers being told as a child that before they could fly, they were caterpillars, and they ate milkweed because they knew it was poisonous to their predators. Some predators were too hungry to care and ate them anyway. Only one-in-a-hundred caterpillars would get to fly. But they ate milkweed anyway until they were fat, then they curled up in a sleeping bag called a chrysalis and hung from the branches of trees to wait for their second birth.



Abraham Begeyn, "Still Life with Thistle,"

circa 1650s.

A storm rumbles off across the valley and sunlight breaks through in its wake. The dirt road is scattered with shining blue and silver portals. He remembers walking with his mother, holding her hand, imagining being pulled through them into that underworld and drifting weightlessly. He remembers her voice, excited to show him something beautiful. How she motioned ahead: "Oh, sweetie, look!"

Wing-to-wing, hundreds of Monarchs covered the surface of a puddle like a burnt-orange blanket, undulating lethargically in afternoon warmth. He remembers crouching down and his hand recoiling to the sharp change in her voice, "No, no! Don't touch! You can't touch them, honey. They are very, very delicate."

He remembers curling up on the couch early in the mornings and twirling her hair between his fingers while she leafed through the thin pages of her old King James Bible. She says it was the most obsessive thing he did. If he was crying in church it was likely because she wouldn't let him claw his way into her long, brown, carefully styled hair. In the event of an outburst he would be escorted to the nursery and left with all the other criers. He learned to twirl his own hair and draw on the back of donation envelopes and prayer request cards, whatever it took to endure an hour of liturgy without causing a scene. According to the pastor there was an invisible war being waged inside of him and his soul was in the balance. According to his mother, his actions and even his thoughts could tip the scales.

When he walked through the sliding glass door, blood streaming from his scalp, holding a fistful of his own hair in one hand and scissors in the other, her terror was quickly suppressed by rage. Following the swift and blunt force of her hand he was marched to the barber shop where for the first time he felt the cool, metallic pleasure

of clippers vibrating over his skull and the feeling of wind moving over his exposed mind as they walked back home. They stopped on the sidewalk to speak with her friend who insisted on running her open palm over his new bristle. She cooed to the sensation and a mysterious pleasure fused him to that moment, to her touch, like a corridor of heated light.

He remembers hiking to Fallen Leaf Lake in northwest Montana and his father giving him what was in his metal-frame rucksack so his weary youngest sister could fit inside. The extra weight made his shoulders chafe and bleed, made him proud. It rained a warm summer rain and when they arrived they were all soaked through their clothes, except for his sister who emerged from under the top flap of the rucksack dry as a bone. They had a small fire and he remembers feeling almost magical as he unrolled his sleeping bag and sealed himself inside.

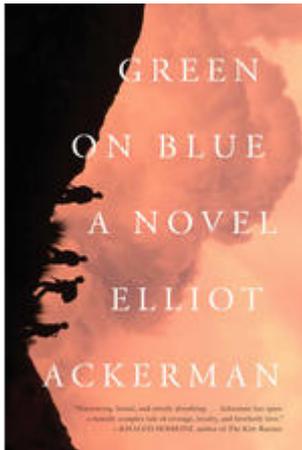
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## Why Don't Afghans Love Us: Elliot Ackerman's Green on Blue

There aren't many "literary" fiction books out about Afghanistan, and almost none authored by veterans. Brian Castner, a veteran of Iraq, [published an essay in Los Angeles Review of Books](#) that examines the phenomenon in more depth. Roy Scranton, another veteran of Iraq and a philosopher, [claims in a different LARB essay](#) that there are plenty of war stories by American veterans already available, and that Western audiences should be looking for stories by or about

the host nation. This claim has been made by writers like Joydeep-Roy Battacharya and Helen Benedict, as well.

Enter *Green on Blue*, a savagely honest, realistic novel about Afghanistan by Elliot Ackerman. Imminently readable and deeply subversive, *Green on Blue* draws on its author's extensive experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to paint a stunning and accurate description of why the West is losing and will lose in Afghanistan. The problem and solution both exist within the book's title.



“Green on Blue” is a military term that derives from the color of units on NATO battle maps – blue colored units are friendlies (America, Great Britain, *West Germany*), green are allies (France), and red are enemy (Soviet-aligned countries). Green on blue describes what happens when allies deliberately or accidentally attack friendly soldiers / units. The incidents, therefore, are incredibly troubling – they represent the failure of alliance, the prospect of new enemies arising from botched friendships. They hint at betrayal, in the context of existential struggle.

In *Green on Blue*, Americans are “blue” and Afghans are “Green,” the allies. Crucially to the plot, there are no “red” – there are enemies, but this term, in the context of Afghanistan, is fungible. The plot revolves around an Afghan militiaman named Aziz, who navigates generations of human relationships between Afghans, while attempting not to be crushed by the war. At its heart, the war is described as a competition between groups for social standing – respect from

young men, and money from the Americans.

According to the capitalist west, money is supposed to buy respect and loyalty. This forms the basis of an important miscommunication between Americans and Afghans in the novel – a strategic cultural miscalculation of extraordinary significance. Money, in the context of the story, represents a sort of catastrophic idealism, which merely compels individuals to compete in a zero-sum game for resources. Ultimately, American dependence on the coercive power of tangible resources predicts the type of incident hinted at in the book's title.

On a local level, in Afghanistan, the most important thing is respect – the honor of a group (“*nang*”), which is under constant threat of insult. Once “*nang*” has been challenged, the group is required to respond to the insulter with revenge – “*badal*,” which consists of appropriately violent action. The protagonist learns this essential lesson as a child: *“Once, in Sperkai, an older child had split my lip in a fight. When my father saw this, he took me to the boy’s home. Standing at their front gate, he demanded that the father take a lash to his son. The man refused and my father didn’t ask twice. He struck the man in the face, splitting his lip just as his son had split mine...”* On this plane, *Green on Blue* operates as a sort of slowly-unfolding national tragedy, wherein the Afghans become their own heroes and villains, and the Americans – representative of “The West” – are simply agents of catastrophe and destruction, casually and unthinkingly paying money to keep the feuds going, hoping to find “High Value Targets” in the war on terror.

Aziz is both nuanced and archetypal – a quintessentially Afghan product of the West’s involvement in Afghanistan. At the story’s beginning, his father (a fighter for hire), dies at some point between the Civil War period after Soviet rule and NATO’s intervention in 2001: *First there was the dust of people running. Behind the dust was a large flatbed truck and*

*many smaller ones. They pushed the villagers as a broom cleans the streets... Amid the dust and the heat, I saw men with guns. The men looked like my father but they began to shoot the villagers who ran.* The gunmen are never identified – they destroy Aziz’s village and move on, leaving Aziz and his older brother orphaned. After a difficult childhood where he and his brother struggle against the odds to improve their tenuous life at society’s margins, another, similar tragedy involving a Taliban suicide bomber leads Aziz to join the “Special Lashkar,” a CIA-funded militia on the border of Pakistan.

In the “Special Lashkar,” Aziz learns to fight and kill. The group’s leader is an Afghan named Commander Sabir, paid by the CIA to fight against the Taliban. Readers quickly learn that Sabir is enmeshed in his own struggle over “badal” and “nang” – Sabir is hunted by the brother of a Taliban fighter that Sabir killed, a Taliban named Gazan, in revenge for that now-dead brother having killed Sabir’s brother, the former leader of the Special Lashkar. If that seems complicated, it should – alliances and enmities proliferate in the book, ensnaring all and forcing everyone to take sides in the conflict. Nothing is sacred, not love, not honor, not brotherhood – nothing. And behind it all stands the enigmatic, fascinating character of “Mr. Jack,” the CIA officer who runs the Special Lashkar, and who seeks targets for America’s war on terror.

Mr. Jack is my favorite character in post-9/11 fiction. There isn’t much of him in the book, but his influence is seen everywhere – he resonates through the book’s pages, exceptionally powerful, moving in and out of autochthonic settings like he belongs, while making obscene and absurd mistakes that lead only to more preventable strife. Mr. Jack is so unaware of the consequences of his actions, that he becomes an incidental antagonist. His hunt for professional success turns Mr. Jack into a caricature of a man, a careerist who seeks professional success without any understanding of its human cost.

There are no heroes in this book, which could make it a World War II story similar to *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* – save that there are no antiheroes, either. There are believable human characters that find themselves at war in spite of themselves, forced to fight for meanings that shift and collapse until the only thing left is friendship, then friendship collapses as well. This resembles the standard Vietnam narrative, like *Matterhorn* or *The Things They Carried*, but the characters in Ackerman's book are not motivated by ambition or by ideology – rather they seek simply to survive, not to be killed. The characters in *Green on Blue* do not have space for the type of indulgent self-reflection imagined by the typical Vietnam-era author, such as Tim O'Brien or Tobias Wolff – this is a book where there is little room or space for interiors. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new type of fiction – a story that balances deliberately earnest *almost modernist* narrative plotlines, while acknowledging the infinitely expansive potentials of post-modern perspective and awareness of self- and other-ness, only to reject that literary and intellectual dead-end as (paradoxically) reductive. Or, as Aziz says in the opening sentence: "*Many would call me a dishonest man, but I've always kept faith with myself. There's an honesty in that, I think.*" Rather than opening a meditation on postmodernity, Aziz goes on to show us precisely, meticulously, how that opening statement could possibly be true, in the context of Afghanistan.

*Green on Blue* makes a series of bold philosophical, political, and literary claims, which are plausibly balanced and supported throughout. It is a powerfully realistic and exciting adventure; it is also a eulogy for the failed post-colonial ambitions of a capitalist society that believes it can demand service for money, as though the developing world is a whore or a dependent. It is among the best, most accessible and accurate descriptions of Afghanistan available – and the single greatest critique of the West's policy yet written.

Incidentally, the most successful militia commander in Paktika Province for the last ten years – a wealthy man who has successfully played the role of insurgent, bandit, contractor, and militiaman on both sides of the fence? That would be Commander Aziz.