

# Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Clock Strikes Twelve

My year-long run as guest-columnist for The Wrath-Bearing Tree comes to an end this month. I'm not sure if WBT founders Adrian Bonenberger and Mike Carson planned for my stint to last only twelve months, but in my mind it was always the goal. Twelve months, twelve Strike Through the Mask! columns, each with a different subject, obviously, but more personally, each with a different tone or style. My goal was variation within similarity, like a record album of yore: some songs fast, some slow, some mournful, some more upbeat, but all recognizable as the unified work of the creator.

I also welcomed the pressure of a monthly deadline. On my blog Time Now, I publish when I please. But I grew up loving the daily, weekly, and monthly columns of writers I admired in the newspapers and magazines I read—thinkers who wrote lively, interesting columns on a regular schedule. Finally, I realized I could use Strike Through the Mask! to range wider and dive deeper than I typically did in Time Now. Subjects I might not touch in Time Now, such as soldier memoirs and current events, I have explored at length in Strike Through the Mask! Most of all, I wanted to show Time Now readers a little more of the “real me”—my opinions, thoughts, and interests apart from the focus on other peoples' books and artworks in Time Now.

I couldn't have asked for better editors than Adrian and Mike. They have allowed me to write almost without suggestion or guidance, for better and for worse, and their infrequent edits and comments have always been on-point and encouraging. The war-writing community is lucky to have such thoughtful and generous leaders.

So what lies ahead? Time Now seems to have run its course, as well. I won't definitively declare it's over, but it does seem time for other writers more in-tune with the spirit of the 2020s to carry on its work. But who knows? I've read John Milas's *The Militia House* and watched *The Covenant* and I have thoughts.... Navy veteran Jillian Danback-McGhan's short-story collection *Midwatch* is on the way. A movie titled *Fremont*, about Afghan interpreters in America, and *Northern Shade*, about PTSD, are highly recommended and I look forward to watching them. Entire genres related to war-writing, such as YA and romance, lie mostly untouched, awaiting analysis....

I started Time Now in 2012 when it seemed clear that a vibrant writing-and-publishing scene centered on the work by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was emerging. One precipitating event was the 2010 War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air Force Academy. I was fortunate to attend and it was there I first met or heard read authors such as Siobhan Fallon, Matt Gallagher, and Benjamin Busch. Another catalyst was the publication in 2012 of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*—novels published by major houses and widely reviewed and largely celebrated. At the time, I was teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where I had already sponsored a reading by Brian Turner. That had been an early-on, isolated event, however, and now I sensed a cohort of vet-writers and affiliated family members and interested authors with no formal military affiliation coalescing. I also intuited that I, an infantry veteran of Afghanistan with a PhD in English Literature, was in a position to document and promote the emerging work.

Scenes need events, outlets, and platforms to thrive. From that first 2011 WLA conference to the next one, in 2018, a number of events and publishing venues, infused by a sense of community, shared endeavor, and a do-it-yourself ethos, made being a vet-writer exciting and fulfilling. Online publishing

sites a-plenty were available, and publishers and general readers were reasonably open to vet memoir, fiction, and poetry. Seemingly every large city and college campus was hosting vet-writing workshops and the vet-writer presence at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference (AWP) was robust. I regularly attended AWP between 2014 and 2018, where I hosted several panels and met and mingled with many writers in the scene. And until 2015 I had a position at the United States Military Academy at West Point that allowed me to stage events for vet writers and artists to read and perform for cadets.

That physical sense of community has largely faded, and vet-writers now rely on social media to promote, connect, and opine. That's OK, but if writers and artists now coming into print feel isolated rather than connected by the digisphere, I remind them that the cohesion of 2010-2018 was largely generated by the initiative of the participants themselves. If recreating that energy seems desirable, then the answer is to stage readings, host events, create platforms, reach out, form alliances, and keep knocking on doors. I'm not a position to help make that happen much anymore, but I love the spirit and energy when I see it.

To end here, I'll offer some photos of prominent authors in the scene I've taken over the years. Some I've already published on Time Now, but they're too good not to be given another airing. Salute to all the writers and their works!

Brian Turner, author of *Here*, *Bullet*, *Phantom Noise*, and many others, Red Bank, NJ, 2018



Siobhan Fallon, author of *You Know When the Men Are Gone* and *The Confusion of Languages*, West Point, NY, 2018



Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Highland Falls, NY, 2014



Matt Gallagher, author of *Kaboom*, *Youngblood*, and *Empire City*, Camden NJ, 2016. (This picture was supposed to be taken in front of Walt Whitman's house, but what can I say? We screwed up and took the photo a few doors down from the Good Gray Poet's residence.)



Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition* and others, West Point, NY, 2014



Elyse Fenton, author of *Clamor*, Dodge Poetry Festival, Newark, NJ, 2014



Brian Van Reet, author of *Spoils*, Austin, TX, 2016



John Renehan, author of *The Valley*, Arlington, VA, 2018



Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue*, *Dark at the Crossing*, and many others, Middletown, CT, 2019



Adrian Bonenberger, author of *Afghan Memoir* and *The Disappointed Soldier*, Branford, CT, 2021



Brian Castner, author of *The Long Walk* and *Disappointment River*, among others, New York, NY, 2020



Playwright Jay Moad and fiction author Jesse Goolsby, New York, NY, 2017. Moad and Goolsby were two of the driving forces behind the United States Air Force Academy's War, Literature, and the Arts journal and conferences.



Roy Scranton and Jacob Seigel, Brooklyn, NY, 2018. Scranton is the author of *War Porn* and Seigel is the author of the short-story "Smile There Are IEDs Everywhere," from the seminal vet-writing anthology *Fire and Forget* edited by Scranton and Matt Gallagher.



Jennifer Orth-Veillon and Benjamin Busch, New Haven, CT, 2018. Orth-Veillon edited the anthology of writing about World War I *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* that features a who's-who of vet and vet-adjacent writers. Busch is the author of the memoir *Dust to Dust*, as well as a poet, actor, filmmaker, photographer and illustrator.



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**Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": The Great**

# Contemporary War-Writing Quiz

30 questions; let's see who knows their stuff. Answers below.

27-30 Correct: Expert

23-26: Sharpshooter

19-22: Marksman

Less than 19: Bolo

Ready, go!

1. "The war tried to kill us in the spring." This is the opening line to what 2012 novel by an Army veteran about two buddies deployed to Iraq?

2. "We shot dogs." This is the opening line to what 2014 short-story by a former Marine?

3. The author of the 2011 short-story collection *You Know When the Men Are Gone* is \_\_\_\_\_.

4. In 2012, this novel about an Army Iraq veterans attending a Dallas Cowboys football game was a finalist for the National Book Award.

5. Match the author with the title of his or her story in the 2013 short-story anthology *Fire and Forget*:

Jacob Siegal

"The Train

Brian Van Reet

"Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek"

Mariette Kalinowski

"Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere"

6. What are the names of the Iraq Army veteran and Afghanistan Navy veteran who started the NYC non-profit war-writing

organization Words After War?

7. This 2012 novel set in Afghanistan drew inspiration from the Greek classic "Antigone."

8. Match the title and author name of these GWOT war novels written by civilian women:

Roxana Robinson *We All Come Home*

Helen Benedict *Carthage*

Joyce Carol Oates *Sand Queen*

Katey Schultz *Be Safe I Love You*

Cara Hoffman *Sparta*

9. Name the titles of the two graphic novels written by Maximillian Uriarte, one set in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan.

10. This novel by Marine veteran Elliot Ackerman takes its title from a phrase used to describe American casualties suffered at the hand of their Afghanistan allied partners.

11. Match the author and title of these novels written in the early years of the GWOT veteran-writing boom:

Benjamin Buchholz *The Sandbox*

David Zimmerman *Last One In*

Nicholas Kulich *One Hundred and One Nights*

12. Match the names and titles of these novels and short-story collections written by male civilian authors:

Luke Mogelson *A Big Enough Lie*

Eric Bennett *These Heroic, Happy Dead*

Jonathan Chopra                      *The Good Lieutenant*

Aaron Gwyn                              *Veteran Crisis Hotline*

Whitney Terrell                        *Wynne's War*

13. The name of Marine veteran Atticus Lish's novel about a former Marine adrift in New York City is \_\_\_\_.

14. Match the names of the Iraqi authors with their works:

Sinan Antoon                            *The Corpse Exhibition*

Hassan Blasim                          *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Ahmed Saadawi                         *The Corpse Washer*

15. Match the name of the war-writing collective/seminar/journal and its founder:

The Wrath-Bearing Tree                Lovella Calica

Veterans Writing Project                Adrian Bonenberger

Voices from War                            Travis Martin

Military Experience and the Arts        Kara Krauze

Warrior Writers                              Ron Capps

16. Which military academy sponsored the War, Literature, and the Arts conferences in 2011 and 2018?

17. In what branch did vet-writers Brian Castner, Jesse Goolsby, Eric Chandler, and J.A. Moad serve?

18. In what year did Phil Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* win the National Book Award?

19. This Navy veteran's short story "Kattekoppen" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2013 and then in the author's short-story collection *Bring Out the Dog* in 2018.



Deeds is \_\_\_\_\_.

26. The two novels set in Afghanistan written by Pakistani-British author Nadeem Aslam are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

27. "The Trauma Hero" is a concept associated with which Army veteran writer? \_\_\_\_\_

28. What are the names of the war-writers portrayed in this photo accompanying a 2014 *Vanity Fair* article titled "The Words of War"?



(*Vanity Fair* photograph by Jonas Karlsson)

29. What are the names of the authors featured in this 2015 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) panel?



30. What are the names of these war-writing luminaries, taken at a reading at The Strand Bookstore in NYC in 2014?:



BONUS (2 points): Benjamin Busch wrote the introductions to one of the following anthologies and Ron Capps wrote the other. Match the author with the anthology:

*Retire the Colors*

*Incoming*

Answers:

1: Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds*

2: Phil Klay, "Redeployment"

3: Siobhan Fallon

- 4: Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*
- 5: Jacob Siegal: "Smile, IEDs Are Everywhere." Brian Van Reet: "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek." Mariette Kalinowski: "The Train"
- 6: Matt Gallagher and Brandon Willetts, respectively
- 7: Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch*
- 8: Roxana Robinson: *Sparta*. Helen Benedict: *Sand Queen*. Joyce Carol Oates: *Carthage*. Katey Schultz: *We All Come Home*. Cara Hoffman: *Be Safe I Love You*
- 9: *The White Donkey* (Iraq), *Battle Born: Lapis Lazuli* (Afghanistan)
- 10: *Green on Blue*
- 11: Benjamin Buchholz, *One Hundred and One Nights*; David Zimmerman, *The Sandbox*; Nicholas Kulish, *One Hundred and One Nights*
- 12: Luke Mogelson, *These Heroic, Happy Dead*; Eric Bennett, *A Big Enough Lie*. Jonathan Chopra, *Veteran Crisis Hotline*; Aaron Gwyn, *Wynne's War*; Whitney Terrell, *The Good Lieutenant*
- 13: *Preparation for the Next Life*
- 14: Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*; Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition*; Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*
- 15: *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*: Adrian Bonenberger; Veterans Writing Project: Ron Capps; *Voices from War*: Kara Krauze; *Military Experience and the Arts*: Travis Martin; *Warrior Writers*: Lovella Calica
- 16: The United States Air Force Academy
- 17: United States Air Force

18: 2014

19: Will Mackin

20: Tracy Crow and Randy Brown (Charlie Sherpa)

21: Brian Turner's *The Hurt Locker*

22: Brian Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country*; Benjamin Busch, *Dust to Dust*; Ron Capps, *Seriously Not All Right*; Kayla Williams, *Loved My Weapon More Than You (or, Plenty of Time When We Get Home)*

23: Colin Halloran, *Shortly Thereafter*; Hugh Martin, *The Stick Soldiers*; Kevin Powers, *Lines Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*; Philip Metres, *Sand Opera*

24: Lisa Stice, *Forces*; Jehanne Dubrow, *Stateside*; Elyse Fenton, *Clamor*; Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

25: David Abrams

26: *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*

27: Roy Scranton

28: Left to right: Maurice Decaul, Phil Klay, Elliot Ackerman, Kevin Powers, Brandon Willetts, Matt Gallagher

29: Left to right: Brian Turner, Katey Shultz, Siobhan Fallon, Benjamin Busch, Phil Klay

30: Left to right: Adrian Bonenberger, Roxana Robinson, David Abrams, Matt Gallagher

BONUS: *Retire the Colors*: Ron Capps; *Standing Down*: Benjamin Busch