

AMERICAN LITERARY FICTION ABOUT THE WARS
IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Fire and Forget [2013] is the latest offering of the military-publishing complex, devoted to printing the works of returning soldiers and their spouses. The fifteen stories gathered here describe, in various ways, action in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the difficulties encountered in returning to civilian life. The collection also features some experiences with form, including a sardonic 'choose your own adventure' which places the reader inside the gun-turret of a Humvee. Despite all this variety, however, there is a disappointing consistency of tone and effect. Stock characters frequently reappear—and the deranged enlisted man, the hapless officer, the meddling civilian—and rarely do they challenge stereotypes. Additionally, questions of the author's motivations are unavoidable as these stories seemed designed to support one viewpoint with regard to war.

Brian Van Reer's 'Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek' is a good example of the collection as a whole. This story is about two wounded soldiers, Rooster and Slead, who go on a fishing trip, hoping to find solace in nature. Among other injuries, Rooster's face has been masked, burned featureless by fire. He reflects, 'Wounded warriors'—the term the Army used to refer to us in official memoranda.... 'I guess it's what we were, but the phrase was too cute to do our ugliness justice.' Exacerbating his physical injuries are his loneliness and a family that, at least in his eyes, is of no use. His father is a government employee who tests chemical and biological weapons on monkeys while his mother spends 'her days watching cable news and talking to the cat.' Rooster blames them for his wounds with a rhetorical appeal to the reader: 'How could they have known their values would lead me to this? That all that safety would push me into the fire?'

And here is the collection's main issue: its overreliance on self-conscious lament. It is indicated in Van Reer's title, a parody of Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River.' (Many authors in the collection are graduates of MFA programs and workshops; they seem determined to achieve some type of literary authenticity while at the same time rationalizing their military service.) The concept of Van Reer's story is also illustrative. 'The whole situation was nightmarishly helpless,' Rooster observes, again self-consciously. 'But there it was, our bodies transformed in a flash I could not remember. The only thing now was deal with it. Time was reckoned in two halves, before and after.' This statement applies to almost all of *Fire and Forget*.

It is a string of situations, each describing soldiers who are nightmarishly helpless. They find themselves transformed in a flash of war almost impossible to remember. And instead of creating critical distance for the reader to assess the war, the characters are presented to us already judged: hideous ghouls such as Slead, evil scientists such as Rooster's father, or native housewives, such as his mother. This fixed perspective prevents the reader from entering into Rooster's world at all. Thus when 'Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek' finishes, we are unable to grasp Rooster himself or the final image. He says, 'Hailstones began to fall. They hit Big Hunting Creek like bullets ricocheting off depleted aluminum armor.'

What the reader soon realizes is that *Fire and Forget* is populated with a host of victims and psychopaths. Like Chinese actors, they wear identifiable masks. Could men named Rooster and Slead behave and different? Instead of entering into a bargain with the authors, or being seduced by them, the reader must submit to them completely. Roman Skaskiw's 'Television,' for instance, begins, 'It'd been a day since the attack...no one was hurt, just a local kid they shot.' This is the voice of the omniscient third-person narrator, not a character. The reader is forced to accept this jocular tone toward violence, presumably to congratulate ourselves that we recognize the horror that the soldier-actors do not.

Two exceptions are the highlights of the collection, Colby Buzzell's 'Play the Game' and Siobhan Fallon's 'Tips for a Smooth Transition.' Buzzell takes Van Reer one step further by having the protagonist undermine his self-examination with irreverent humor. He is lampooned in the final twist of the story. This has a powerfully revealing effect, deepening our understanding of how strange it can feel to return to civilian life. Fallon, by contrast, uses a romantic relationship to engage the reader. She is the only author

in the entire collection who writes convincingly about love. Her two central characters are Colin, a soldier recently returned from Afghanistan, and his wife, Evie....

Fallon's constant use of names maintains distance in an almost childlike way. But unlike other stories in the book, our alienation from the characters does not lessen our emotional response. We are able to think critically about Evie and Colin from many different angles. The returned soldier seen here has our sympathy, fear, and respect. Evie is also a figure we enjoy contemplating, unsure if we should want her to succeed in hiding her infidelity from her husband. These are the only two characters in the collection threatened by something other than war. The multi-dimensional scene that Fallon creates further entices the reader because it is impossible to guess how it will end. Nevertheless, it is within their power to choose—to maintain their marriage despite years of deployment or to go their separate ways.

Tellingly, Fallon is the only contributor who has never served in the military. Her husband is an army officer. It would seem that her position on the sidelines has enabled her to better connect with the reader. But in other stories there is an almost religious attitude toward war. This is the transformative power Rooster references when he defines his life as 'reckoned in two halves.' Colum McCann agrees, writing that 'We are scripted by war,' in the foreword to the book. 'It is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us.' For him, war has power and agency—it is even a source of our collective identity. For the veterans in *Fire and Forget*, this divinity is not an abstract idea as it is for McCann, but it is a war made flesh, a previous experience in Iraq or Afghanistan on whose behalf they now proselytize. What a terrible god to worship."

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