

DAN ALLAWAT

Larry Brown's *Dirty Work*: Telling the Truth About the Vietnam War Through Fiction

For fictional literature to succeed one might argue that the essential elements of fiction must be clearly defined and established within the story at hand, i.e. those elements of plot, character, setting, style, dialogue, point of view, and theme. That would be a fair argument, though one might place more value on truth when it comes to the success of a fictional story. Perhaps truth can be attained by simply attending to those aforementioned essential elements, thus creating a fictional story that succeeds. Of course, this is not to imply success in terms of commercial appeal or numbers of books sold. No, for this argument, success is measured by the fictional story's ability to render the truth to the reader about the human condition and the greater world at large. In this regard the late Larry Brown was a successful writer of fiction; a teller of the truth. And in his fictional tale *Dirty Work* he tells the truth about the Vietnam War in a manner that succeeds, is successful, in speaking to the human condition of those who served in that war. To go further, he tells this truth in such painfully vivid and heartbreaking honesty that it could be argued that this book is one of the most definitive books ever written about the physical and emotional toll the Vietnam War exacted on those who fought there. As such, it is a book that should be embraced and widely read by all of those who hold positions of such authority that they may one day have to make decisions that could ultimately lead this nation into future wars.

Between the years of 1950 and 1975 America was embattled in a war in Vietnam between the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese. Supporting the

anti-Communist South's fight against communism in the North, America's involvement was ever-increasing to the point that it peaked in the late 1960s when more than five hundred, twenty-five thousand American troops were deployed there to fight. America's interest in Vietnam was based largely, perhaps solely, on the fear that the small Asian nation would fall under communist rule, thereby causing a domino effect in which all of Asia would be lost to communism. History would eventually reveal that this assumption was perhaps incorrect and further, that this misunderstanding of the perceived threat cost fifty-eight thousand American lives and three hundred, fifty thousand more casualties. This loss of life and the accompanying casualties, together with the staggering monies invested in this war, accomplished very little in the long run as the United States, unable to claim victory over the North, eventually withdrew from Vietnam. In 1975 South Vietnam surrendered to the North and Vietnam was reunited. Unfortunately, for many veterans of the Vietnam War, it didn't really end in 1975. For many, the war raged on as they tried to acclimate their lives back to a sense of normalcy in the midst of being emotionally scarred beyond repair and often physically disabled as well. It is within that arena where Brown's *Dirty Work* is constructed.

The novel tells the story of two veterans of the war that spend a day and night together, side-by-side in a Veterans Affairs hospital. It is some twenty years after the war and Braiden Chaney, who lost both arms and both legs in the war, has been in this particular hospital for many years. As the story opens a new patient has been put in the bed next to him. Walter James, essentially has no face, the result of an apparent rocket grenade, and suffers seizures as a result of bullet fragments lodged in his brain. Walter was brought to the hospital the result of an incident involving a car. He has little memory of the incident. Braiden is African-American and Walter is Caucasian. Both were raised in the poor rural south and the story accurately blends in the realities of their lives in growing up in such conditions. Despite being predisposed with certain prejudices against one another they share much in common in their understanding of growing up poor in the south. They also both have strong southern religious convictions on what constitutes right and wrong, though the war has tempered much of their belief system, even so many years later. Eventually, as the two spend hours talking to each other about their lives, their history, and the war, Braiden gathers the courage to ask Walter to take his life, to end his dire existence. Walter resists as he feels he would be guilty of the greatest of sins. As they continue to discuss their lives, and Walter's hope to return home, the weight of Braiden's request hangs uncomfortably between them akin to a third character. The complex realities of the war's effect on their lives,

both physically and emotionally, are stamped on every page as Brown tells a story which is devoid of any romantic notion of war and soldiering. There are no hero's, nor any effort to label the characters as noble in their sacrifice made on behalf of their country. There is only the reality of the suffering these men have endured as a result of a war largely not understood by the majority of the participants, including of course, Braiden and Walter. Braiden reflects upon this notion at one point as he tells Walter of his last morning at home with his mother prior to deploying to Vietnam: "I laid up in there that morning. Had my uniform hanging up in there. Soldier of the most powerful nation in the world. And all I could think was Why, you know, why? I didn't even understand the whole thing. Just went cause it was my duty" (Brown 23). Brown's ability to render these characters in a truthful light, believable in their despair and questioning of their fate so many years after the war ended, is a testament to his commitment to remain honest in his portrayal of the victims of this war.

The Vietnam War prompted a prolific amount of literature to be written about it. Lucas Carpenter remarks

One of the many ironies of the Vietnam War is that the one war America lost gave rise to more and better literature—collectively—than any of America's other twentieth century wars, the overwhelming majority of it written by the war's veterans who realized early on that this was not their fathers' war (30).

Much of this literature was written in styles reminiscent of war stories of past wars, i.e. stories in which innocent, naïve young men go off to war and are changed by the horror of war, yet still retain some sense of nobility in their courage and patriotism. However, there were new voices emerging as well that sought to peel away the layers of romanticism and the idea of sacrifice resulting in stories laden with the truth of war. As Tim O'Brien says in *The Things They Carried*: "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue" (O'Brien 89). The voice of a nation questioning their involvement in Vietnam and more so, the voice of the soldier on the ground in Vietnam, can be found in many of the stories that O'Brien has written, as well as a number of others written by authors who wrote in this new, emerging voice. Brown's *Dirty Work*, while not necessarily

emerging from the same roots as O'Brien's (O'Brien served in Vietnam, Brown did not), was a story that held to O'Brien's credo in that there was no rectitude, nor virtue to be found in the Vietnam War or its aftermath.

Larry Johannessen suggests that in order to understand the literature that was written about the Vietnam War it is best to

consider the four major categories into which the novels fall: basically they (a) deal with the experience of Vietnam (the combat narrative); (b) look at the effects of the war back home; (c) examine the refugee experience; or (d) focus on the legacies of the Vietnam War, particularly the impact of the war on the children of the generation that came of age during the Vietnam War (374).

If one had to place *Dirty Work* into one of these categories it would most likely settle into category (b): the effects of the war back at home. And while that category fits for the sake of placement into a larger group it is difficult to consider it a story that is defined in such broad terms. *Dirty Work* is a war story. There are battle scenes depicted within the story that could easily be categorized as combat narrative in scope. And Walter has a younger brother that was five or six years old when Walter went off to war and in that sense there are scenes in the book that could fall into the category that focuses on the impact the war had on children. But in the end it is a story that is mostly about Braiden and Walter coping with life, or perhaps not coping with life, on the terms bestowed upon them as a result of the Vietnam War.

What separates *Dirty Work* from most fiction dealing with the Vietnam War is Brown's determined effort to refrain from allowing hope to creep into a hopelessly sad reality. Again, although there is literature out there such as Tim O'Brien's that maintains a similar distance from instilling some moral code, however subtle, into the text, examples are few and far in between, and none so realistically bleak. There are plenty of stories that address the despair of those returning wounded veterans but more often than not, there is a point in which some meaning or light is shed that turns into understanding on the part of the character, or characters, who suffer. A good example of this is the novel *In Country*, written by Bobbie Ann Mason. *In Country* chronicles the story of a teenage girl, Samantha, or Sam for short, whose father was killed in Vietnam before she was born. She is raised in part by her uncle, Emmett, a Vietnam War veteran himself who struggles through life trying to cope

with the long-term emotional effects the war had on him. Determined to learn more about the war that took her father's life she begins to question various veterans that served there, including her uncle. He in turn struggles with her endless questions as it brings back constant memories of the horror he faced there. In the end the protagonist and her uncle travel to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington where she seems to gain some understanding, if not closure, concerning the death of her father. Likewise, her emotionally wounded uncle seems to have benefited from directly dealing with the war in this manner.

There is nothing wrong with novels such as Mason's. It is only used here as an example of how most often, fictional literature about the Vietnam War, or perhaps any war, tends to eventually find ground in a sense of closure or resolve on some level. As W.D. Ehrhart says in regards to the ending of Mason's *In Country*:

And indeed, at the end of *In Country*, as Sam ponders the mystery of that other Sam A. Hughes chiseled onto the wall and Emmett's face "bursts into a smile like flames," we can't help feeling like everything is going to come out okay after all. We like stories that end that way. We like wars that end that way. But real stories seldom end so neatly, and wars never do.

Larry Brown understood this premise and took it as his charge in telling the story of Braiden Chaney and Walter James.

It would be easy to call Mason's *In Country* a bad choice for a piece of fictional literature to be used to compare or contrast with *Dirty Work*. There are no grossly physically disabled characters in *In Country* for example, though the uncle is believed to be suffering from the effects of Agent Orange. Yet both stories share the fact that they take place a number of years after the war has ended. And both deal with characters trying to deal with life on terms dictated to them by the direct, or indirect, connection with the Vietnam War. But again, it is Brown's refusal to provide any sense of relief to the characters in *Dirty Work* that sets it apart from *In Country* and most other literature that came out of the Vietnam War. Even the non-fiction classic memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*, which chronicles author Ron Kovic's struggle as a wounded and wheel-chair-bound Vietnam veteran offers inspiration if for no other reason than Kovic's determined and often successful fight for better conditions for veterans. That is not to take away from its literary value; indeed the inspirational element, coupled with the depictions of the horrendous struggles Kovic went through, cement this particular's book place in the annals

of Vietnam War literature. Larry Brown simply chose to tell a story where no light shines, where inspiration is not to be found, and in doing so he remained faithful to those veterans whose realities shared common ground with Braiden and Walter.

As *Dirty Work* draws to a conclusion Walter remembers the incident that led to his admission to the VA hospital. In the days leading up to the incident he had struck up an unlikely companionship with a young woman who was terribly scarred herself from the waist down due to having being attacked and mauled by a dog when she was a child. She and Walter quickly became close and over the hours of telling Braiden of this fledgling relationship he slowly pieced together the final sequence of events that led him to the hospital. He had been with this young woman in a car, parked in a creek bed; they were moving past their scars and making love amidst a rain storm. As the heavy rain continued the water begins to fill the creek bed in the form of a flash flood. Still refusing to offer any relief to the characters in this story, Brown depicts Walter as having an inopportune seizure just as the water begins to rise around the car doors. The girl, trapped beneath Walter's immobile body, drowns under the weight of him. Rescuers find them, his head inches above the water, hers inches below. This realization of these events and the further emotional scars Vietnam has now placed on him causes Walter to reconsider Braiden's pending request. As William Becker reflects in his review of *Dirty Work*: "Perhaps it is recognition of the enormous price-paying he himself now faces that makes him accept Braiden's argument: Braiden has paid enough" (212). The story closes with Walter's decision: "I stood over him for a long moment. He opened his eyes and looked at me when I closed my hands around his throat. He said Jesus loves you. I shut my eyes because I knew better than that shit. I knew that somewhere Jesus wept" (Brown 236).

In *Dirty Work*, Larry Brown crafted a story that speaks to the long-term effects war places on the individuals who fight. In many ways the book is an anti-war novel, but to label it as such risks alienating the very readers who should be most tasked with reading it. If Anton Myrer's *Once an Eagle*, an engaging novel that depicts a lone soldier's rise through the ranks of the Army spanning several wars, is required reading at our Military Academies, then perhaps *Dirty Work* should be required reading by any and all officials elected by the people and for the people of this country. Perhaps war is inevitable, but extreme care should be taken when considering it as an option toward resolving any conflict. After all, when that decision is made, the potential story of Braiden and Walter gets rewritten over and over again.

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DAN ALLAWAT has had short stories and poetry published in several literary publications, both online and in print. He holds a MFA in Creative Writing from National University. A U.S. Navy Veteran, he lives and works in South Florida.