

# FLASHES OF WAR

*Acclaimed New Flash Fiction*

"This is a brilliant, unsettling, and disturbingly beautiful book... Writing of this degree of commitment and integrity is living evidence of the power of fiction to tell the truth about reality."

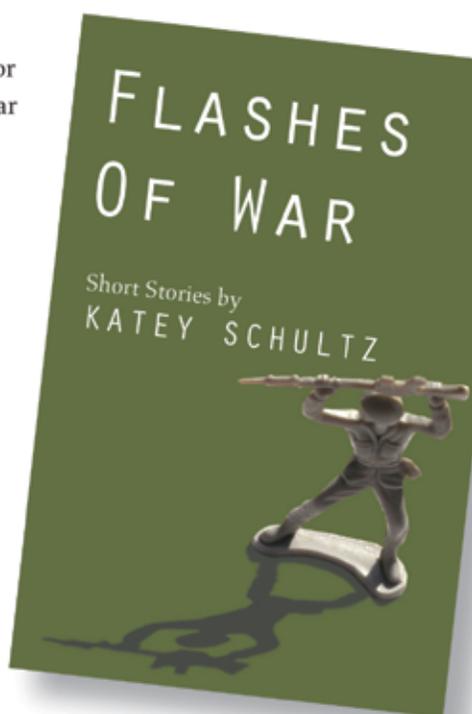
— From Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, author of *The Watch*

## THE BOOK

Illuminating the intimate, human faces of war, this unique series of short stories by award-winning author Katey Schultz questions the stereotypes of modern war by bearing witness to the shared struggles of all who are touched by it. Numerous characters—returning U.S. soldier and pragmatic jihadist, Afghan mother and listless American sister, courageous amputee and a ghost that cannot let go—appear in *Flashes of War*, which captures personal moments of fear, introspection, confusion, and valor in one collection spanning nations and perspectives. Written in clear, accessible language with startling metaphors, this unforgettable journey leaves aside judgment, bringing us closer to a broader understanding of war by focusing on individuals, their motivations, and their impossible decisions. *Flashes of War* weaves intimate portrayals of lives affected by the War on Terror into a distinctive tapestry of emotional resonance. It builds bridges, tears them down, and sends out a universal plea for reconnection.

## KATEY SCHULTZ

Katey Schultz grew up in Portland, Oregon, and is most recently from Celo, North Carolina. She is a graduate of the Pacific University MFA in Writing Program and recipient of the Linda Flowers Literary Award from the North Carolina Humanities Council. She lives in a 1970 Airstream trailer bordering the Pisgah National Forest. This is her first book.



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CANDICE L. PIPES

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## Flashes of War: a conversation with Katey Schultz

I teach war literature though I've never been to war. Do I sound like I'm confessing at an AA meeting?—telling something dark, embarrassing...destructive. I first tried to justify my teaching authority by assembling concessions. After all, I have “deployed,” just not to Iraq or Afghanistan. I have held command. I have studied war strategy. I've lost friends to war—killed in action. I've been left at home with children while my husband deployed to Afghanistan, passing every day, hoping for his safe return. I prayed constantly for my sister's survival while she served in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. I've worn the uniform of the United States Air Force for 15 years. Still I felt unqualified in many ways to instruct on war.

Then it dawned that my job is not to teach war, it is to teach the literature of war, and the literature of war is not merely about war. It is about humanity, about love and conflict, about pain and peace, about death and life. And teaching war literature is about even more than that. It's about exposing the complexities of war and the complexities of the larger human condition. It's about challenging indoctrinated ideologies and ingrained political dogmas, it's about pushing students to understand that war is bigger than themselves, bigger than their supersonic jet airplanes, bigger than their own nation—and that the impact of war is immeasurable, exponential, and, yet, almost always impossibly minimized.

At the end of my first year of teaching war literature I found myself searching for voices with fresh perspectives and alternate points of view. I was uncomfortable that, to an extent, my course validated a good/evil dichotomy. USA...Good, Middle East...Bad. That, to an extent, the texts I had selected promoted a “bombs on target” kind of mindset without fully exploring the impact of those bombs. What I felt

was missing was that sense of contradiction that Tolstoy writes about with regard to man's inherent capacities for action. Tolstoy writes about action that depends on free will and action that does not. In that simple dichotomy resides the ironies of war and post traumatic stress. When man wrongly transfers what Tolstoy calls "consciousness of freedom" to acts "performed in conjunction with others," moral dilemmas emerge. What felt missing in my classes was a literary voice that helps us be more deeply mindful of the defining elements of war.

Katey Schultz is a fresh voice. Schultz herself thinks about her collection of short stories, *Flashes of War*, as filling in these gaps. Self-described as a "thirty-something, mild-mannered white girl," Katey Schultz takes on the challenge of imagining war from multiple angles. In the Epilogue to *Flashes of War*, she discusses her motivation for writing as rooted in some rudimentary questions: "What were these wars actually like? How did people operate under extreme conditions with less-than-ideal tools for survival? How did their personal traits influence their motivations and experiences against the backdrop of war? What were the impacts of war inside the family home or in the far reaches of an individual's mind?" She further explains her choice of fiction as a means to explore these questions, adding: "I was not interested in becoming an embedded reporter or detailing the facts of either war through journalism. There are many writers who have done that and done it well. As someone inclined to make sense of the world through story, I knew my window into these wars would have to be narrative. What better way to begin than with unanswered questions and the creative freedom to write my way toward something I could believe."

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**I am a Northwest girl myself and I know that Portland can be anti-military to the extent that when I was a Lieutenant visiting high schools in that area, I was not allowed in Portland's public schools. So, I am intrigued that you decided to write about war. Why war? Do you see yourself as an activist? Do you have someone close to you who has or is serving?**

*I think it's natural to wonder about such questions after reading Flashes of War, but I actually don't consider myself an activist at all—nor do I consider Flashes a political book. I don't know anyone who is serving and, other than a few friends with siblings who served, I have no ties to anyone who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan.*

*My interest in writing about war actually has less to do with war and more to do with a desire to explore moments of disconnect. When you put two things next to each other that don't make sense, or seem so disparate that the human mind is jarred to a halt, that's a very powerful moment. It's that moment I'm most interested in, and a war zone happens to be full of many such moments. You'll notice that the stories are not "shoot 'em up" or action-packed narratives about battle. They're "people" stories, as one reviewer said, and I have to agree.*

"People stories" is a useful way to think about Schultz's collection. People stories that connect through Schultz's described "moments of disconnect." In her story, "With the Burqa," we get to see the world from behind the veil. The shrouded woman narrates, "the world came at me in apparitions, every figure textured by the mesh filter in front of my eyes." Schultz compares these covered women to "forgotten boulders" and likens the burqa itself to a tomb, "damp and dark in here, just like the grave where my father's bones have turned to dust." Most powerful is Schultz's juxtaposition of the entombed, inconsequential, hidden woman and the revengeful, insurgent dream that this covered woman fantasizes to requite her father's violent death: "One night, I dream that the missile takes root. The garden groans and stretches, growing rounds of ammunition and grenades." The American soldiers come to harvest the weapons, "a bullet for the sergeant who pestered my child in the middle of the night...And the grenades? Those are for the pilot who dropped the missile on my house." The woman walks away after all of her home-grown weapons are sold and listens, "I hear the pop and whir of bullets first, then the grenades explode. I don't have to turn around to see what disaster looks like." Schultz may not consider her work political, but "With the Burqa" offers a sentiment reflected in several of Schultz's stories, that whatever good America might be doing, whatever noble efforts might be happening on the front lines, there is an unmitigated amount of harassment and unjustifiable death that continues to impede, even prevent the end of these wars. I wanted to know how Schultz felt about the difference between her fictional work and the more factual accounting journalistic non-fiction offers.

**Doug Stanton's review offers high praise of this collection and it strikes me that you both approach war through a similar lens, what you call "window"—narrative. You are clear that you did not want to be the next Dexter Filkins or Sebastian Junger, but wanted to write fiction about war. Can you talk more about how you understand that difference—the difference between**

**journalism and fiction? About what you think fiction can offer in terms of the “truth” about war?**

*In a perfect world, journalism is wholly objective fact. Quotes are verbatim and verifiable. The chronology of events is presented in order and any unnecessary information is omitted. On the other hand, realist fiction reads “as true as life” and may or may not be based on something the author actually experienced, but it is not—and never was—a verifiable, lived experience, nor are the people, conversations, and events wedded to anything that’s taken place in the past.*

*Your observation that Doug and I have a similar “window,” narrative, is interesting. I’d say that where Doug’s “window” is based wholly on facts, my “window” is based wholly on things that I imagined. Sure, my stories sound realistic and at times are inspired by facts, but that’s because I’m a contemporary realist fiction author—not because I have any authority in the world of journalism.*

*I think fiction can offer a lot in terms of the “truth” about war, just as it can about life. My work takes on the human elements of war and tries to make those elements ring true. By comparing bullets being shot by the enemy to Hershey’s Kisses being thrown by his daughter, the soldier in the opening story of *Flashes of War* says something to the reader without explicitly saying it. And that is: war doesn’t add up. Nobody wins. You can train your hardest and complete your mission but you’re always going to feel the tug of one world up against another. It’s hard to say something like that directly and have it hit home. But when you compare bullets and chocolate, or enemy fire and a child’s game of catch, these are things that don’t seem like they belong together. That’s shocking, and it has the power to make the reader take pause and feel the human element of warfare and its impact.*

Schultz possesses the ability to create jarring, honest images that pull and cause you to consider your perception of reality. In “My Son Wanted a Notebook,” she describes the aftermath of a car bomb, writing, “Limp bodies encircled the flaming car like petals around the center of a flower.” She describes the women executed in Kabul stadium in “Into Pure Bronze,” “their blood-stained burqas flapping in the wind like wings that could never quite lift them to safety,” and later the victim of another violent death, “Just an arm. Hanging there like it was a flag or something.” In these juxtapositions Schultz is able to show the complexities and ironies of war, how the violent murder of innocent women can be associated with the promise of angelic peace, how the severed arm of a publicly brutalized guiltless

citizen can be propagandized as freedom. It is these kinds of shocking, yet truthful disconnections that allow us to believe these stories.

**I was drawn to your cherishing “the creative freedom to write [your] way toward something [you] can believe in.” As Tim O’Brien has taught us, we get as much truth from fictional accounts about war as we do from the “true” stories. Nonetheless, I sense a resistance in my cadet students when I teach fictional accounts of war. My students tend to want to invalidate “fictional” accounts of war—one wrong use of a term, one inaccurate historical detail and they want to write off the author’s efforts. Are you concerned about how veterans (and when I say veterans I really mean both the military and the military families) will respond to your work? Were you worried about being able to create an authentic soldier’s voice?**

*I was concerned about accuracy when describing weapons, division of organizational power, and military logistics. I was concerned about describing the physical terrain in a convincing manner and addressing Middle Eastern culture. I don’t think that desire would have been any less, though, had I chosen to write about, say, deep sea diving. I like realistic fiction that is grounded in plausible, believable situations. It gives me something to stand on, as they say, and I can imagine my characters from there.*

*I’m not “concerned” about how veterans and military families will respond to *Flashes of War*, but I do value their opinions highly. The reviews from veterans so far have been encouraging, and I’m truly flattered. I can understand the desire to nit-pick, especially when someone’s writing on “your turf,” but ultimately creative writing has nothing to do with the impulse to be perfectly accurate. It has to do with telling a good story...and for readers, it hopefully has to do with getting lost in that story.*

*I didn’t have to worry too much about creating an authentic soldier’s voice. Voice is very organic for me and has more to do with rhythm and a way of seeing than it does anything else. I found that, once I knew the basics of movement and instruction and possible scenarios in warfare, the voices were quick to follow.*

*As I researched and imagined, inspiration for stories in *Flashes of War* initially came in two ways: from the rhythmic and emotional quality of a quote or from the jarring contrast of a memorable image. One example is a series of YouTube videos I watched with embedded reporter Ben Anderson. In an interview, a soldier looked into the camera and said, “America’s not at war. America’s at the mall.” I felt struck by the tension and cadence of this—the war versus the mall—and wrote my first war story titled, “While the Rest of America’s at the Mall.” Another example came from the*

*movie Kandahar, which included a scene depicting a group of Afghan civilians, each missing a leg and using crutches. The men raced toward a plane flying overhead that dropped half a dozen prosthetic legs from its hatch, sending them down on parachutes. When I saw this, I paused the DVD. The countryside looked beautiful: rolling brown hills against a cloudless, azure sky. Then there were these legs silhouetted against the sun, these men hobbling toward them. This was a moment my mind could not comprehend, and I felt compelled to explore it by writing "Amputee" and "My Son Wanted a Notebook."*

Schultz employs an oft-used trope for American soldiers' lack of cross-cultural communication in her story "Checkpoint." In 2004, an American soldier shot into a vehicle at a checkpoint killing the driver—husband and father—in front of his family also in the car after the soldier had held up his hand signaling halt, a gesture that in Iraqi culture means to proceed forward, which is exactly what the driver had done.

Beyond Schultz's "soldier" stories, her stories from the perspectives of non-combatants are most effective at conveying the multitude of war's realities. In her story, "KIA," instead of detailing the circumstances around a soldier killed in action or simply counting a dead body, Schultz accounts for the dead soldier's personal articles as they are removed:

*Closet*

6 cotton undershirts, 1 pair Nike running shoes, 6 pairs Under Armor athletic socks, 2 pair Army-issued black running shorts. 1 pair women's striped panties with the word "Love You!" scrawled across the front. 1 Eastern Washington University sweatshirt. 1 flat of Peanut M&M's. 4 tubes Pringles. 2 packages Chips Ahoy. 1 half-eaten bag Doritos Cool Ranch.

We go on to learn that this soldier, Donald R. Swarignon, was loved. He was a father of young children and a baby he hadn't met; he liked funny movies, and had a thing for J-Lo. In Schultz's imagining this "KIA" is more than a number, much more than the nightly declaration from Brian Williams that "we had 3 Americans killed in action today in Afghanistan." This story is reflective of Schultz's larger project to honor the individual soldiers, wives, sons, daughters, and even "enemy" combatants and victims—the counted as well as the uncounted casualties of war.

**I most liked your stories from the perspectives of those left behind or those “other casualties of war.” Probably my favorite story is “Getting Perspective.” You captured the feeling of loss so beautifully and I found it very moving. I also very much appreciate the humanizing you do of the Iraqi and Afghanistan casualties of war. You are able to both show the enemy and reveal the innocents caught in the crossfire.**

*Once I realized I was amassing enough stories to possibly create a collection around the theme of war, I grew curious about other perspectives. I looked at what I had, and tried to write stories where the gaps were. In other cases, I was inspired by military jargon and acronyms (which I love) and wrote stories that way: “WIA,” “MIA,” “KIA,” “AWOL.” There are also a few “call and response” pairs in the collection: “First Commander” and “Pressin’ the Flesh,” for example, which take the same moment and come at it from different sides.*

*I really didn’t think about what was important to accomplish. That’s just not how writing works for me. I follow my creative impulse and I go where the emotional resonance seems most interesting and fresh. So in terms of duty or audience or obligation or politics or objectivity—none of that entered my mind. I was working with my imagination and with my heart, as that’s where all stories are born.*

Even if Schultz was not conscious of the power of her narrative choices when writing, she offers several counter-narratives in her stories that effectively and necessarily challenge common understandings of war and war’s consequences. One example is in her story, “The Quiet Kind,” which details Nathan, a returned war veteran, in his struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The narrator diagnoses Nathan with “the quiet kind of PTSD,” and importantly, most of Schultz’s characters suffer from this less obvious, but equally as dangerous and destructive kind of PTSD. Nathan is not a drunk or overtly offensive brute, yet he wakes from sleeping to his daughter’s touch not knowing if he just dreamed of choking her in self-defense or if he is choking her. He’s a divided self—Nathan and the Nathan watching Nathan, always disconnected, always on guard, always still at war with himself. Part of Nathan’s process of self-healing is to disremember his war experience, “Slowly and deliberately, he amputated memories,” but impossibly so as his body’s response to everyday stimulus is now intimately connected with war. Ultimately Schultz offers hope that Nathan will recover a more complete self through his witnessing of his experience to his wife, but there is also the

acknowledgement that this process of healing takes time and may never be fully completed. Perhaps even more importantly, Schultz recognizes that Nathan and other veterans suffering from PTSD are not the only combatants in this war, but as the wives in “Waiting: Part II,” express, “When they come home, they won’t be the same. We’ll have to love them differently. It’ll be our turn to fight, each of us on the front lines of a private war.”

One more example of Schultz’s not-so-subtle resistance narratives is found in her story “Sima Couldn’t Remember.” In this story an Afghan woman pregnant with twins is rushed to the hospital (forced to walk 5 miles) when her labor pains begin early. She loses the little boy first and three days later a premature and sick baby girl is born alive. The mother of five girls already, she knows she will be judged by her inability to have a son, and understanding the struggle her newest baby girl will have to suffer, she smothers her daughter’s breathing: “When she let go, she felt her daughter back inside of her, pulsing like a tiny ghost, safe inside the walls of her heart.” Only this act of matricide can keep her daughter safe from the brutality she is sure to witness and suffer and only through this act of matricide is this woman, this mother, able to love her daughter perfectly and resist the system that allows for her and all of her daughters’ continued abuse. Her beauty is not covered by heavy cloths, her body is never possessed unwillingly by another; she is, in her brief life, always free and uncorrupted. Schultz’s resistance narratives, as I choose to think of them, caused me to ask her about the range of sociopolitical issues tackled in her collection:

**You tackle many sociopolitical issues within these stories: PTSD, AWOL, human rights and specifically the lack of human rights of Afghan and Iraqi women, the side-switching of Afghan informants, collateral damage (the death of innocents, destroyed infrastructure, refugees, the devastated families). Are you aiming this collection at a specific audience? Who do you want to read your book?**

*I’m not aiming this collection at a specific audience. And like most writers, I want everyone to read my book! ☺ In some ways it’s an uphill battle with Flashes of War because people have a predisposition to believe that there’s no way a thirty-something, mild mannered white girl can write about 21<sup>st</sup> Century warfare and Middle Eastern civilians. But why not?*

*Not everyone chooses to read about war, and the book clearly has elements of war in every story. But they’re people stories; stories that look at the human predicament—*

*and in that way this book is no different than any other realist fiction collection. So my hope is that my audience can widen, and people can enjoy these stories for the characters that they bring to life. If they learn something about war in the process, all the better.*

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**CANDICE L. PIPES** is an Assistant Professor of English at the United States Air Force Academy. She is currently working on multiple projects involving African American women's fiction and depictions of sexual violence in those works.

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**KATEY SCHULTZ** grew up in Portland, Oregon and is most recently from the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. *Flashes of War* is her first book. Learn more at [www.kateyschultz.com](http://www.kateyschultz.com)