

On Military Service & Writing Fiction: A Conversation with Ashley Hand

Hugh Martin

In this conversation, Poetry Editor Hugh Martin speaks with USAFA graduate, Wallace Stegner Fellow, and writer, Ashley Hand. After graduating from USAFA and serving with the Air Force across the globe, Hand has transformed herself into one of today's most exciting literary voices. Her first novel, *Land of Enchantment*, will be published with Scribner in 2026. In this conversation, Hand speaks about the process of writing a novel, the experience of transforming military service into writing, literature and war, and the ethical obligations between lived military experience and the solitary work of writing on the page.

Hugh Martin (HM): Your first novel, *Land of Enchantment*, is set to be published with Scribner in 2026. Could you tell us a bit about this book and offer, as best you can, a general synopsis? Also, how has your life in the Air Force, along with your experience at a military academy, informed some of the content of this novel?

Ashley Hand (AH): *Land of Enchantment* is a love story that is also telling a war story. We first meet Mac and Amelia on a deployment to Africa. They are quarantined in a decaying old mansion after assisting with a humanitarian mission in a region where many people are sick and dying. Mac is enlisted and Amelia is an officer. They fall in love at great risk. Mac is this charismatic, carnal archetype of a man. Amelia knows from the start that he has the ability to ruin her and she surrenders herself to the relationship anyway. We follow their secret romance



Ashley Hand (MFA) is an Air Force Academy graduate, veteran aircraft maintenance officer and team leader with multiple deployments overseas in support of combat search and rescue, joint special ops and humanitarian aid missions. She is a former Wallace Stegner Fellow (2022-2024) in fiction and an award-winning writer.

as it unfolds and eventually unravels over the course of the next number of years. Amelia starts out as this calm and self-possessed woman, and by the end has morphed into an unhinged narrator whose only salvation is the friendships that outlast this relationship that is constantly shipwrecking her in new ways. The book is atmospheric, it's a love letter to the American southwest, it's angry, it's told in a way that is very close to the skin. And over time it becomes clear that this intense emotional landscape is mapping onto a broader geopolitical reality, especially as we learn more about both Mac and Amelia's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. By the end of the novel, we realize that this very visceral personal story Amelia has been

telling is also actually a polemic on US imperialism.

I started rage writing this book after I got some writing advice to lean into your obsessions. At the time I was heartbroken and angry about a relationship that had just ended and it was all I could think about so I thought, hell, I'm just going to write about this and see where it takes me, and I unleashed myself on the page. That's why the novel is written in a combined first and second person narrative voice. Amelia is writing to Mac the entire time and calls him "you." It started out as ranting in my notebook in a series of unsent letters. Over time Amelia's voice became separate from my own and began taking me places I did not expect. Eventually I realized I was writing my version of a war novel, and one that did not resemble

anything I'd seen before in the canon of war literature. The political concerns of the novel were latent at first and I had to excavate a lot of the motifs through revision when I realized what was going on under the surface. And eventually those ideas about imperialism, power, violence, surveillance, etc. were sublimated into the relationships and conversations and anecdotes in the book. So basically, the book started because I was pissed off at a man, and then it morphed into something I was not expecting when I first began writing.

I don't think I realized when I was in the military that it was going to be such a defining experience. I did not think I was going to write about it. I was pretty casual about the decision to get out. I thought, this era of my life is over now. On to the next. But it wasn't that simple. I was seventeen when I left for the Academy, and I was twenty-eight when I got my DD-214 and took my uniform off for the last time. Those are pivotal years. I don't know if I'll write about the military again as directly as I did in this novel, but I didn't think this novel would exist in the first place, so who's to say.

HM: Moving from the military uniform to the writer's metaphorical desk is not the most typical path; could you discuss some of the challenges or obstacles you've faced beginning as a writer, finding a publisher for your first novel, and continuing to move forward with your work? Do you see, or feel, any remnants of your military career and lifestyle overlapping with the more sedentary work of writing?

AH: I generally thought of my transition out of the military as seamless. I had gotten into the MFA program at Cornell and was living my dream. I'd always wanted to be a writer. I loved my job in the Air Force but hated most of my bosses. I was not meant for the bureaucratic and

political hellscape of officer life. I knew it was the right decision to get out. But then after I separated, I would wake up every morning at five a.m. full of anxiety that the phone was going to ring with bad news. I had a very stressful job as an aircraft maintenance officer. It took a long time for my nervous system to come down from that. The only thing I knew to do was stay busy and keep moving. I would load my dogs in the car and take them on long hikes through the gorges of upstate New York. I'd also bought this awful little house with my VA loan. It was very ugly. It had carpet in the bathroom and psychedelic orange walls and was running on an 80-amp electrical service which would struggle to power a hairdryer and a toaster at the same time. I didn't have time to think about anything except making this place habitable and beautiful. I was running saws and moving toilets and tearing down walls and buttering tile at all hours of the day and night. I taught myself everything on YouTube. There is something really meditative about working on a house. I'm grateful I had something tactile to do with my hands. I found that very grounding. It would have been an incredibly abrupt transition from the chaos of the flight line to go straight into this cerebral life of reading books and writing stories. I went to class a few days a week for a handful of hours and then I went home and I worked. When the work slowed down, I started having a hard time. But I didn't realize it had anything to do with transitioning out of the military. I spoke to a therapist. I was like, why am I crying all the time? She said, have you considered that you are struggling to adjust to being a civilian? It had not occurred to me. It took me a while to realize that the military had irrevocably shaped my life, and that to be a veteran is to be a bit of an alien wherever you go.

After Cornell I went straight to the Stegner where I was surrounded by incredibly mature and talented writers. The Stegner made me fully believe that anything was possible. I started seriously working towards finishing and publishing the novel. I went on submission before I left

Stanford. The path kept opening up for me. I'm thrilled to have found a home for this book with Scribner. They made a considerable investment in my writing. My editor got the novel on a Friday and asked for a phone call on Monday. I was on a road trip at the time and pulled over at an old western hotel in the middle of nowhere in southern Colorado to have a zoom call. I took a couple of weeks to shop the novel around with some other editors but then we circled back and signed a two-book deal in a pre-empt. At the time I had very little of my second novel written, but we sold it on a tentative synopsis. I'm grateful to not have to be going on submission again anytime soon. It was an incredibly exciting but also stressful time, to have such high hopes and also no idea what the outcome would be. As my friend Yohanca Delgado put it, going on submission feels like someone is about to put your heart on a scale and tell you how much it weighs.

HM: You've published a great deal of short fiction and essays in many esteemed journals including *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *West Branch*. How has this type of writing—the essay, the short story, for instance—affected how you plan, construct, and map out a novel? How does a fiction writer, for example, toggle between those two different prose forms—the short story, the novel? Do you lean toward one genre over another?

AH: Oh goodness. My novel started out as a series of short stories. Mostly because I didn't think I was capable of writing a proper novel. Then a professor told me that all my stories sounded the same. He said, you know, you keep turning in the exact same manuscript. I was offended. Then I realized that maybe they all sounded the same because they were aspects of a greater whole. So I started stitching them together. Now I don't think I'll ever be a short story writer. I love the

essay as a shorter form, and I'll continue writing essays, but I think I have the inclination of a novelist. I want to live inside a character and live inside a story for as long as I can. That being said, constructing the novel, once I realized that was what it was, felt a lot like stumbling around in an unfamiliar dark house, running my hands along the walls and bumping into furniture. I did not have a coherent plot when I started connecting the stories. I just kept following the voice wherever it would take me, and kept following my obsession with image. There was no mapping or planning. There was just a vague reaching for a climax. The book really revealed itself to me as I wrote it. For my second novel, I'll at least know going into it that I am indeed writing a novel, and that will hopefully help me waste less time. But even so, with my next book, I'm just writing towards an idea that I'm currently obsessed with. Hopefully that magic will happen again and the structure will reveal itself to me as I bring the narrative voice to life.

HM: In some of your short stories, particularly ["The Summer of the Bees"](#) and ["Burning Man,"](#) I noticed a keen attention to both the syntactical rhythms and sonic elements of each sentence; in "The Summer of the Bees," for instance, the narrator, living alone in a cabin while recovering from surgery, recounts the challenging journey to this secluded location: "To get to the cabins, I had to drive past oil drilling, through the fume and fetor of dryland farming into the bowels of New Mexico." One notes here the subtle alliteration—that "fume and fetor...dryland farming"—but also that direct, understated metaphor: "the bowels of New Mexico" (which, from my read, speaks implicitly to the narrator's specific focus and relationship with their own body; I won't offer spoilers!). In another memorable moment in "Burning Man," the narrator describes turning an aquarium light off, as the sun goes down, and watching the fish in the dusk; the image is fantastically tangible and resonant: "I...watched the fish slow and eventually go still, hovering in

the water with lidless stares as the gloam in the room began to retreat into dusk.” In short, how do you manage the larger plot and narrative concerns against this very precise, seemingly microscopic, attention to the movement and language of the sentence?

AH: Thank you! This is so lovely to hear. I truly appreciate you reading some of my work! I am obsessed with sentences. I derive so much pleasure from writing them. Image, detail, rhythm, specificity of language — all of it is so important to me. I don't even mean that I like sentences to be ornamental. In fact, I think you have to be pretty ruthless to craft a good sentence. The simpler and more precise the sentence the better. I would prefer a book with very little plot that is written with great attention and economy of style over a great concept that's written like trash. I've heard this type of plotless gorgeous book referred to as a Ferrari with no engine. Well, okay. I'm fine with sitting in a Ferrari that's not going anywhere and feeling the sun on my face. Of course it's lovely when the Ferrari has an engine. But if I have to pick one, plot or vibes, I'm picking vibes every time. The feeling of reading some small vignette that stokes some emotion or idea is just exquisite. I always carry a notebook with me. I'm always writing down words I like, or images that pop into my head, or things I think of as I'm reading. When I'm writing, I almost exclusively read books in translation because I find the style of prose to be far more in alignment with the way I write. The style of French and Italian writers I find really nurturing. Everything in my work springs from a narrative voice. That voice informs the general aesthetic sensibility.

HM: Although many of your published stories do not revolve completely around military service and war, deployments and service are always, it seems, hovering in the background, surfacing through memory, complicating a speaker's thought process as life goes on as a civilian. As the narrator puts it in "Burning Man": "I'd been out of the military for a year. I'd picked up a job with a real estate company. I telecommuted from the sofa and pushed papers. I didn't care about it." As you know very well, writing "about" military service and war carries a long—seemingly infinite—literary history; as someone who recently left the military and is now committed to writing, has any war-related literature influenced your ideas and aesthetics? Are there any writers—past or present—approaching the subject of service and war that you turn to specifically?

AH: I wish there was. No. I've of course read everything you're supposed to read. Tim O'Brien and Phil Klay and Kurt Vonnegut and all the rest. My greatest pain point in my work is writing with authenticity about the military, and specifically about a woman at the center of its machinery. This seemingly infinite literary history is one that basically doesn't include women. The women exist as muses or as props to cultivate a wider emotional climate. It's wild to me. I keep looking. Where are my ancestors? Sometimes I forget that I've looked everywhere and I look again. There is nothing. At least nothing that is literary with a capital L, that has been enshrined in the canon. The canon of war literature is indisputably male. And the stories bear little resemblance to the way that women tell stories. I have had to show myself the way. It has been very difficult. Where are the women? Women have been graduating from the Academies for fifty years. Where are their stories? None of them have gone mainstream. They are not being

taught in classrooms. Of course there is historical fiction about women in war, and there is nonfiction about women at war. But that's not what I mean.

It did feel as though publishers recognized that the story of women at war is one that hasn't really been told in a serious way before, and that made my submission process easier. There was a desire to hear this type of story. I hope to keep trying to open up this world of writing for other military women who have stories to tell. I don't think I have the best stories to tell, not at all. I just think I got lucky with the resources and investment and mentorship to learn how to tell whatever stories I do have. One of my good friends, also an Academy grad, was deployed to Kabul for a year as a public affairs officer and worked intimately with the first female Afghan fighter pilot. Her husband is an HH-60 rescue pilot. On her mid-tour sabbatical, she met up with him in Africa and they went on a safari. They were out in the bush, sleeping in tents and driving around in an old land cruiser. That was where she got pregnant with their first son. She went back to Kabul. She carried her son in an active war zone for four months, almost to the very end of her deployment, before she couldn't conceal her belly any longer. She's one of the wildest women I've ever met. Stories like hers need to be told. I hope that the canon grows, and that more women are equipped with the tools they need to tell their war stories.

HM: Because you served in the Air Force under that all-encompassing, amorphous American period called "The Global War on Terror," do you, particularly as a writer, feel an ethical obligation to reckon with or document our seemingly endless American wars? On the other hand, since you spent so much of your adult life in uniform, do you feel any desire to write outside of that GWOT experience, perhaps outside of that veteran identity?

AH: Oh yes. I very much feel that obligation. When I was in the military, I was too busy to think about politics. I was thinking about how to keep a machine running. The machine runs on inertia, not on ideology. No one is philosophizing when they're spending eighteen hours a day working a physically and mentally demanding job. Philosophizing is a luxury. I got to Cornell and realized just how political everyone was and realized I was going to need to get some politics myself. So much of the novel was fleshing out my own understanding of the system I had just emerged from. I'm proud of what I wrote, and I am sure a lot of people will not like the conclusions I drew, and I also am okay with that and I hope it is just the start of more women getting access to mainstream publishing to tell their war stories. My next novel has nothing to do with the military. And I'm excited to see where that takes me. I would love to create a community of women veterans who are writing and working to tell their stories and helping facilitate access to traditional publishing with the relationships I've been lucky to develop.

Hugh Martin is the Poetry Editor of *War, Literature & the Arts*. He's the author of *In Country* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2018), *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2013), and *So, How Was the War?* (Kent State UP, 2010). He's the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and fellowships from Sewanee, Yaddo, and Ragdale.

Ashley Hand is a service academy graduate, award-winning writer, and military veteran who has deployed all over the world in support of various armed conflicts. She holds an MFA from Cornell University, where she was also a lecturer in the humanities, and was selected as a 2022-2024 Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Her fiction, creative nonfiction, and lyric essays have appeared widely both in print and online. Ashley's debut novel *Land of Enchantment* is forthcoming with Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Ashley splits her time between California, Colorado, and New York.