

EDITOR'S CHOICE BY DONALD ANDERSON

Soldier Talk

Writing Vietnam, Writing Life: Caputo, Heinemann, O'Brien, Butler

by Tobey C. Herzog

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NOW AND AGAIN A BOOK ARRIVES that feels immediately and perceptibly essential—such is *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life*, a collection of interviews with four of our most pertinent soldier-writers. That is, what would Vietnam literature be without *A Rumor of War*, *Paco's Story*, *The Things They Carried*, or *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*?—to name but four of these authors' books. As Milton J. Bates puts it in his blurb: "Take your most enlightening encounter with a writer-in-residence, multiply it by four, and you've got this book." These four indispensable writers—Caputo, Heinemann, O'Brien, and Butler—talk for some 200 pages about their lives, their war, and their writing. Soldiers, more than anyone, know what they are capable of destroying, and military veterans who can write are fundamental to our comprehension of the true costs of war, the necessary razing of romance, fantasy, and myth. Of course, the works themselves—the novels and stories and memoir—are primary, but to be granted backstage privileges with these four artists is a singular gift and insight into the processes of art and storytelling.

By many lights, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* is the seminal memoir from the Vietnam War, and while many readers feel bolstered by the "factuality" of memoir, Caputo knows better.

Of course the purely objective [version] of an event just simply doesn't exist. In fact if it did nobody would read a newspaper, and nobody would watch the TV news, because it would be formless and boring. You'd see things blowing up or somebody doing this or somebody doing that, and you'd say, "Well, what does all this mean? What is the context?" It's the reporter that creates the context.

It is indeed, and it is this message that Herzog's collection of interviews reveals. Another theme visited by these soldier-writers is the dismissal of the macho soldier image of Hollywood. "There is nothing macho or romantic about learning what it is to be a piece of meat," says Larry Heinemann. While all war literature is in some fashion political, Heinemann says there are no politics in combat.

Once you're in the field, the argument has passed clean through the "politics" of the discussion. You were standing in the middle of an awful nightmare. Politics had nothing to do with it. First things first, cousin. No, we were completely focused on making it through the night. A ghetto mentality. . . . The war was fucked up, that was clear. We were not very sophisticated about the rightness or the wrongness of the war, but everybody *did* know that it was bullshit. The lieutenants knew, the captains knew. When our new platoon leader, the one lieutenant I had any regard for, came into the platoon in the fall of '67, he had the NCOs, the track commanders meet. He looked at us and said, "Gentlemen, our job is to make sure everybody goes home in one piece." And we looked at him and said, "Lieutenant, this is an excellent plan; how can we help you?" And just like that we stopped doing ambushes; we stopped doing a lot of crazy, just-looking-for-shit-to-do stuff. There was a lot of just hanging back, lots of convoys. Meanwhile, we were, of course, headed straight for the Tet Offensive of 1968. Not fun. I should have come home in a bag.

And with eerie prescience:

The gag was we were there to "win their hearts and minds." That was the propaganda excuse, anyway. But there weren't any hearts and minds won that I ever saw, and I'm sure that we radicalized more Vietnamese than you can shake a stick at. . . .

We were nothing more fancy than an occupation army, and the Vietnamese went along with it because we were easy money.

All four writers, in reporting their past war, remain informed citizens of their contemporary world. Because of Vietnam, O'Brien, not surprisingly, admits to having become "less of an absolutist about the world."

It's not as black and white as I used to think. I'm a much more cynical person than I was. It's not that I didn't think that politicians would lie; I knew they would and did. I just didn't know the scope of it until the Vietnam experience—the breath-taking, stupefying, ballsy way in which deceit is carried out. I don't like getting lied to. I never have. And I didn't like it then and I like it even less now. . . . Our country doesn't like to admit errors. Who do you hear storming the White House now about weapons of mass destruction? Either it was a lie, or it was incompetence. It was one of the two. . . . Either way, you ought to be outraged. We're going off killing people and having our own sons die.

Of course, the possibility of death is something that sticks to soldiers. O'Brien:

There's a passage where Paul Berlin is going to war and he looks at his own hands, "my hands, my hands." Love of one's limbs. Love of their presence, because in war there's always the proximate danger of their absence. No hands. No legs. No feet. No testicles. No head. That passage in *Cacciato* was written with a real purpose in mind: "my hands." Those are things we take for granted. We don't look at our hands and take a shower and say "my hands." But war teaches you to value those hands.

Like Caputo and O'Brien, Robert Olen Butler suspects memory: "I have a novelist's memory. Graham Greene once said that 'all good novelists have bad memories. What you remember comes out as journalism; what you forget goes into the compost of the imagination.'" Unlike Caputo, O'Brien, and Heinemann, however, Butler's Vietnam experience was primarily non-combative. His fluency in Vietnamese put him in special touch with the Vietnamese people, and in fact he spent most of his tour in Southeast Asia as an administrative assistant and

interpreter for the American counterpart to the mayor of Saigon. His love of a nation—its people, language, and culture—is an acute counterweight to the combat soldier’s experience in the same country. “I did not have to confront the evil that resides in my soul, as it does in every human soul,” he says.

For me it was the antithesis of that. Vietnam helped open my capacity to love people as opposed to opening up a glimpse into my capacity to hate and destroy. . . . If I have any guilt, it is because I know some of my good pals just didn’t get the kind of luck that I got. They did not get dealt the right hand over there and had to confront things in themselves that were really tough. . . . I went there and was subject to the same kinds of possibilities that everyone else was, but ended up having an experience that was drastically different from what all my writing pals had. That is the hand I was dealt.

Butler’s lasting impressions, he says, has to do with the Vietnamese people being as vital and ordinary as ourselves, and that is the pertinence of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, his Pulitzer-prize winning collection of stories about Vietnamese immigrants. Feted by prominent members of the Vietnamese literary community, Butler was praised for not making his Vietnamese characters into something exotic. But all four of these writers understand that although war is a crucible that exaggerates human potentialities for both good and evil, all necessary art is a celebration of existence and the surprising inclination of common people toward virtue and the preservation of justice.

Herzog’s interview categories of “Son,” “War,” and “Writing,” form mini-histories of America’s last forty years—informed conversations that will resonate with the members of these writers’ and Mr. Herzog’s own generation. The inspired quality of Herzog’s questions is at least partial cause for the inspired quality of the answers we are guests to in this anthology. All to say that *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life* is hardly a book for only the post-WWII-baby-boomer generation. No, it’s a book that will frighten anyone who wakes to read the news in the morning.

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