

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Ben Fountain Interviewed by David Lawrence

They are called repatriation ceremonies. They're to honor a fellow service member who's paid the ultimate price. I attended several such ceremonies every week during my deployment to Afghanistan. One in particular, about six weeks into my tour, was for a young Marine killed by an IED blast in Helmand. The ceremonial formation was called to attention near the back ramp of the C-17 and the chaplain began his remarks. No sooner did he begin than did another large transport plane land, its engines roaring in reverse thrust. As that sound ebbed it was succeeded by the whirring propellers of a taxiing C-130, a ruckus which in turn gave way to the loud *thwap thwap* rotor noise of a two-ship formation of Chinook helicopters. The chaplain continued, all but inaudible. From my place in the formation I could barely hear the order to present arms—the ceremonial three-second rendering of a salute, the formal farewell. I could only just hear the bagpipes playing the Marine Corps song, then *Taps*, then the command to ceremonially drop our salutes. The din ceased just in time to hear clearly the whine of the hydraulic motor raising the back ramp of the C-17 once the pallbearers had loaded the precious cargo aboard.

Can't there be a moratorium on airfield operations, I seethed, *for just five damned minutes* while we perform a dignified transfer for this poor kid whose body is on its way home to a grief-stricken family? But as I angrily walked back to my desk in the division operations center, I recognized that in some respect this particular repatriation ceremony was a metaphor for our efforts in Afghanistan.

The distracting tumult was appropriate. The war goes on, after all—moving people and supplies and equipment around in this high stakes game of whack-a-mole. And the prices paid by those willing (but let's face it, *unwitting*, for how witting can nineteen year-old boys be) soldiers and marines go virtually unnoticed, drowned out by the cacophony of our everyday lives. Only those standing closest to the chaplain could hear his words. Only those closest to the fallen Marine will be sensible to the exquisite pain of loss. No one else can hear. No one else will feel. It's all, *all* just noise. The e-mail I received later that same day from my childhood friend, thanking me for my service and for my willingness to "protect our country's freedoms," was cold comfort. The note from my friend—an executive for a multinational technology corporation—was infused with earnest sentiment. But I still cringed. *It's a lot more complicated*, I said to myself.

The seething frustration I experienced on that airfield in southern Afghanistan has persisted, however unevenly, in the year-plus since I've returned. This past Memorial Day weekend, however, I was delighted to encounter a book—*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain—that speaks with astonishing clarity to many things which make our recent martial exploits abroad so complicated. I had stumbled across Matt Gallagher's favorable review of the book on *The Daily Beast*, and I sent my colleague an e-mail asking if he'd heard anything about the novel. He appeared at my door in minutes. "Read it last week," he informed me. "It blew me away." I bought the book that evening. And it blew me away, too.

Karl Marlantes, author of the extraordinary Vietnam novel *Matterhorn*, blurbs on the cover of this book that it's "the *Catch-22* of the Iraq War," but I'm inclined to disagree. *Billy Lynn*, like Heller's masterpiece, is laugh-out-loud funny, replete with characters instantly recognizable to every person who's ever worn a uniform, and a latent bitterness courses throughout the entire novel. But *Billy Lynn* isn't satire. Rather, it's a withering critique of contemporary American society, and it consistently calls into question many of the things our country ostensibly values, and how it goes about valuing them. "Heller came at the absurdity and tragedy of war by focusing on the mindless bureaucracy that kept it all going, the almost casual cruelty of the bureaucracy," Fountain told me in a recent interview. "I was more interested in exploring how war, or at least the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, have been marketed and sold to the American people. The corporatization of the war; how the soldiers and the 'support our troops' mantra served as advertising for the war."

The title character in Fountain's novel is a 19 year-old army specialist and native Texan. He's one of a handful of soldiers being paraded around the country after

a Fox News camera crew captured a ferocious firefight on video. The violent exchange here has echoes of the real-life battle in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley in October 2007, wherein Army Sergeant Sal Giunta's heroic actions resulted in his being awarded the Medal of Honor. (As an aside, when I asked Fountain about Giunta and the excellent book, *War*, by Sebastian Junger, which chronicles the 15-month deployment of Giunta's company, Fountain was unambiguous: "Junger's book is not simply one of the best books I've ever read about war," Fountain said, "but one of the best books on human experience, period, what makes us who we are, why we are the way we are.") In the novel, we learn that Billy, after seeing one of his friends wounded and being dragged off by insurgents, rushes to his rescue, engages and kills the enemy, administers first aid to his friend, recovers him under fire, only to watch him die once he returns him to relative safety. Within the span of a news cycle, the shaky footage which captured the feats of Billy and the other soldiers of "Bravo Squad" goes viral. Glory and renown, however ephemeral and dearly purchased, are won, and a victory tour is under way. "One nation, two weeks, eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo Squad. They are Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo, but the Fox embed christened them Bravo Squad and thus they are presented to the world." This instance is the first of many to follow wherein the hordes are told what to hear, what to see, what to believe, with those edicts in turn becoming gospel-swallowed-whole.

And the world—or, more specifically, America's consumer culture—hungrily devours the construct that is Bravo Squad. As the soldiers are feted at venues around the country, at shops and "civic centers and hotel rooms and auditoriums and banquet halls that are so much alike across the breadth of the land," garden-variety Americans come out of the woodwork to slap these newly minted celebrities on the backs. And indulge them with their pent-up bromides and platitudes. After Billy introduces himself in one such encounter, a middle-aged admirer and her daughter-in-law "embark on a spoken word duet of patriotic sentiments, they are 100 percent supporting of Bush the war the troops because defending szszszsz among nations szszszsz owl-kay-duzz szszszsz szszszsz szszszsz, the lady keeps leaning into Billy and tapping his arm, which induces a low-grade somatic trance, thus he's feeling comfortably numb when the lid of his skull retracts and his brain floats free into the freezing air..." Such is one of several apparent drawbacks of being coined a hero.

If *Billy Lynn* is a critique of America's unthinking consumer culture, its misplaced priorities, and its (dis)regard for things that should be of gravest consequence—like sending its youth to a preemptive war—then there is arguably no better place for

that critique to be situated than the old Texas Stadium, at the Dallas Cowboys annual Thanksgiving Day game. Fountain's scene selection is splendid, and his depiction of the people who animate this orgy of commercialism, from the über-wealthy polit-schmoozer men and their Stepford-like wives, down to the moronic fan who, for example, names his son "Cougar," is pitch-perfect. Fountain seizes on the hypocrisy that is a frequent bedfellow of all the low-stakes rah-rah, and he never lets go. Bravo's leader, the confrontational and mercurial Staff Sergeant David Dime, is often the one who exposes that hypocrisy. After observing one uncomfortable exchange Dime has with a Texas oil man, Billy realizes that

the Bravos speak from the high ground of experience. They are authentic. They are the Real. They have dealt much death and received much death and smelled it and held it and slopped through it in their boots, had it spattered on their clothes and tasted it in their mouths. That is their advantage, and given the masculine standard America has set for itself it is interesting how few actually qualify. *Why we fight*, yo, who is this *we*? Here in the chicken-hawk nation of blowhards and bluffers, Bravo always has the ace of bloods up its sleeve.

What's one of the many refreshing things about Fountain's novel, however, is the fact that he deftly exposes such blatant hypocrisy without resorting to preachy cantankerousness. In truth, it's more of a lamentation, to stay with the biblical reference. Fountain's narrator makes this connection explicit throughout the text. While Billy is absorbing the sights and sounds of Texas Stadium as it gears up for the big game, he realizes that "the war makes him wish for a little more than the loose jaw and dull stare of the well-fed ruminant. Oh my people, my fellow Americans! See the world with the prophet's eyes!" A few pages later, after the aforementioned patriotic duet, we learn that "Billy can't help but regard his fellow Americans as children. They are bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem, and no amount of lecturing will enlighten them as to the state of pure sin toward which war inclines." Death and close combat have made Billy privy to some of the secrets of the universe, the reader learns, some kind of cosmic, life-altering insight, to which the average American citizen, for good or ill, remains blissfully ignorant. One Amazon reviewer of the book astutely observed that "Billy Lynn is fiction's best unschooled philosopher since Huck Finn." That's heady praise, but it is the kind of perceptiveness Billy has, here and throughout the book, that suggests there's merit to such an observation.

Yet another of Fountain's achievements is how he enables the medicine of the bitter lamentations and sobering epiphanies to go down. "My wife finally asked what I was reading after I kept howling," my colleague said to me. "A war novel," I told her." The book's humor often derives from Fountain's seemingly inexhaustible cache of fresh similes. "Everything comes hard," the soft-spoken author offered when I asked him about this aspect of the novel. "I have to apply my mind and work at it, though over the years it may be that my brain has developed some wiring that allows the imagery to reveal itself a bit faster than it used to." We meet Billy's mom when he returns to his home in Stovall, Texas. Aside from the brief flashbacks to some signature moments in Iraq, Billy's homecoming is the only sustained narrative that takes place away from Texas Stadium. The family matriarch's "hair was an indeterminate washed-out chemical color, and most of the emotional muscle tone was gone from her face, though she was still capable of sad, skewed smiles from time to time, forcing the cheer like Christmas lights in the poor part of town." Later, Bravo squad meets team owner Norm Oglesby, possessor of that "famously nipped, tucked, tweaked, exfoliated mug that for years has been a staple of state and local news." Norm is Fountain's hilarious send-up of real-life Cowboys front man Jerry Jones. When Billy concludes that Norm's "complexion is the ruddled, well-scrubbed pink of an old ketchup stain," and that all his numerous plastic surgeries have resulted in a look that is "compelling and garish, like a sales lot for reconditioned carnival rides," the reader is left wondering if it's the real or the fictional Cowboys owner Fountain is describing.

Then it's time for the photo op. After Norm's press conference in which he introduces to Cowboy nation his special guests for the day, each soldier is matched up with several Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. Billy's chirpy escorts mug for the camera and nearly smother him in faux affection, as "their wonderful breasts keep noodging up against his arms, setting off sensory bells and whistles like a run of bonus points in a video game." It is almost cliché at this late date to talk about the way soldiers returning home from combat find themselves overwhelmed; recall the powerful cereal aisle scene in the supermarket toward the end of the film *The Hurt Locker*. But Fountain's keen eye for detail, the precision of his language and his phrasing, presents to the reader a new, powerful take on a combatant's sensory overload. "*Billy Lynn* seemed to call for an in-your-face sort of overloading of image and pace and rhythm," Fountain reflects, "which to me seems the typical experience of everyday life in America, sensory overload. And for the soldiers of Bravo, given what they've been through in Iraq, and what's happening to them at Texas Stadium, the overload needed to be ramped up to an almost unbearable pitch."

Nowhere is that fevered pitch—and the chasm that separates American society from the service members who fight her wars—depicted more graphically than at the extravagant halftime show, featuring “the current undisputed world champs of mass-market pop, Colored Girl Division,” Destiny’s Child. Bravo Squad has been hastily and clumsily incorporated into the show which features a staggering array of gyrating dance troupes, drum lines, high-stepping high school marching bands, baton twirlers, disco lights, and, of course, first-rate pyrotechnics.

If there was ever a prime-time trigger for PTSD you couldn’t do much better than this, but lucky for Norm, the crowd, America, the forty-million-plus TV viewing audience, Bravos can deal, oh yes! Pupils dilated, pulse and blood pressure through the roof, limbs trembling with stress-reflex cortisol rush, but it’s cool, it’s good, their shit’s down tight, no Vietnam-vet crackups for Bravo squad! You can march these boys straight into sound-and-light-show hell and Bravos can deal, but, damn, isn’t it rude to put them through it.

That’s putting it politely. The fans, in the stadium and around the world, presumably lap it all up with Pavlovian zest, while Bravo Squad is dazed and, at least in the case of team member Specialist Sykes, reduced to weeping “sparklers of racy little hopeless tears” for which he thinks he has no explanation. As the soldiers are left unceremoniously to pick up the emotional pieces, one of the roadies responsible for packing up the stage barks, “You guys have to leave.” Bravo has been shamelessly and mercilessly pimped out by this point, and no amount of skin-deep noble intentions, either before or after this moment, can compensate. Rudeness, then, becomes an unconscionable act of aggression. The vicious fistfight that ensues between Bravo and the road crew is as much a pressure relief for the reader as it is for the soldiers who’ve found themselves on the business end of this legalized prostitution.

“God’s own country becomes stranger and stranger,” Albert Einstein wrote when describing America to his son Hans, then an engineering professor at Berkeley. “But somehow they manage to return to normality. Everything, even lunacy, is mass produced here. But everything goes out of fashion very quickly.” I took considerable comfort from this line when I encountered it in Walter Isaacson’s wonderful biography of the famous physicist; the book was one of many I read while I was deployed which helped ease some of my numerous frustrations. In *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, Ben Fountain has given us a biting account of lunacy

mass-produced. Whether that lunacy will go out of fashion, however, remains to be seen. One thing is for certain: this novel is getting the attention of people in high places. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey wrote recently that this novel is “worth reading.” I asked Fountain what his reaction was to such an endorsement. His appreciative, insightful response is worth quoting in its entirety here:

Amazement, at first, that he would take the time to read it—that he would have or make the time to read fiction—and then, to tell you the truth, a sense of hopefulness at the fact that a person in his position of power and responsibility possesses that kind of inquiring mind. If he’s reading a book like *Billy Lynn*, then I would venture to say he’s not satisfied with his understanding of human experience. He’s still learning, still trying to figure things out, and I think that’s the only hope for us, really, as individuals and as a society, is if we’re never satisfied with what we know or think we know. We *never* know enough, and the moment we think we do know enough—and, by extension, the moment we become certain of our own virtue, our own special moral brief—we’re dead. The only way we’re going to develop as human beings is if we’re constantly questioning ourselves. And if you think about it, this dynamic underlies the entire notion of a democratic form of government. By choosing democracy, we’re implicitly putting our faith in the collective wisdom of “we the people,” in the willingness and capacity of ourselves to learn and develop, and hopefully to come to a better understanding of our experience, individually and collectively.

“Hey Billy, haven’t you heard, weird is the new normal,” the irrepressible Sergeant Dime says at the beginning of the novel. At first glance, it appears as almost a throw-away line, though on further reflection it’s a fitting ground note for this refreshing, if often sobering, book. While Einstein’s theories endure, perhaps his observation on craziness in the U.S. *has* become obsolete. Maybe it was never true in the first place. But at the very least, one can hope that the success and reach of this novel—and the larger points Fountain eloquently makes—might help slow-roll lunacy’s next production line.

More with Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*:

Soldiers and ex-soldiers seem to respond quite positively to *Billy Lynn*. But you're a former real-estate attorney-turned-writer, and you've never been to Iraq or Afghanistan. When you embarked on this project, were you ever fearful of being unable to create an authentic soldier's voice? What's more, service members can be very persnickety when it comes to nomenclature, slang, uniform wear etc. Ask an explosive ordnance disposal troop what he or she thought of *The Hurt Locker*, for instance. How did you account for any experiential gaps you may have had where writing this novel is concerned? And what compelled you to write about soldiers, battlefield exploits, and a two-week publicity tour?

This is a serious question, and one I've thought about a lot. Given that I've never been in the military, did I even have the right to attempt a book like this? I've spent quite a bit of time in Haiti—at least forty trips there since I started going in 1991—so I do have some experience with violent situations, but I've never been in anything like a shooting war. So even before you get to issues of authenticity and credibility, it seems to me there's a moral issue, a real question as to whether I'm infringing on territory that rightly belongs only to those who have firsthand experience. It's not a casual thing, a non-military guy like me undertaking to write a book about these soldiers' experience. Anytime you're dealing with blood, with matters of literal life and death, you're obligated to approach it with full awareness, and the only way you can possibly justify going forward is to ask yourself whether it's possible that you might have something new and valid to say, something useful in the deepest sense of the word.

Of course, you can't really answer that question prospectively; you can only have a sense that's stronger or weaker, more compelling or less, as you go into the project. In my case it was a pretty strong feeling; in a way, and hopefully not to get overdramatic or precious about it, I would have had a hard time not attempting to write this book. I had to write it? Or had to try, anyway, if I was going to have any peace in myself going forward. And then it became a question of earning the right to write the book by learning everything I could about the experience of these wars, from the most minute particulars on up through the existential issues that war always presents us with. I had to work my way into the soldiers' skins, to the extent such things are possible.

One of the great sub-plots of your novel is the movie that's *almost* in the works for the soldiers of Bravo Squad. Is there a movie version of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* in the works? If so, can you tell us *anything* about it?

Ah, the movies. It seemed to me only natural that Hollywood would glom onto the Bravos' story, hence that subplot; to me it would have been false not to have gotten Hollywood into the mix. And talk about a weird place, with epic deficits of integrity—the levels of bullshit and dissimulation one encounters in that world are truly staggering, but I always figured there were good people in that business, and I've been very fortunate to connect with a group of solid folks who are interested in turning the book into a movie. We've got a deal; where it goes from here, who knows. So many things have to happen for a movie to get made that I'm surprised any movies get made at all, but sometimes it happens.

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