

"*Fobbit*, an Iraq war comedy, is everything that terrible conflict was not: beautifully planned, and perfectly executed; funny and smart and lyrical; a triumph."—Darin Strauss, author of *Half a Life* and *Chang and Eng*

FOBBIT

Fobbit (fä-bat), noun. Definition: A U.S. Army employee stationed at a Forward Operating Base, esp. during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011). Pejorative.

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DAVID ABRAMS
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A NOVEL

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

David Abrams interviewed by David Lawrence

The meeting was chaired by a one-star general who kept his salt-and-pepper hair cropped close to the scalp. His ruddy face bore the hallmarks of being maintained by a seventies-era Remington electric; his chin looked as though it could take the burrs off a hastily-hewn piece of copper pipe. I vaguely detected the cheap, menthol tang of his Aqua Velva from my seat along the conference room wall. His close-set eyes and gruff, monosyllabic locutions attested to a profound lack of inquisitiveness.

Several units were discussing a mission that was to take place over the next several days. The operation had three major components: Objective Pabst, Objective Miller, and Objective Miller Lite. I quickly scanned the room, assuming I would see some of the younger staffers tittering. Surely this was a joke, I said to myself. Had ten years of endless war so beggared the English language that we're left only with the names of watered-down domestic beer to give our operations?

Objectives Pabst, Miller, and Miller Lite were briefed in detail, and all appeared to be "wired tight," as they say.

"One problem," the general grumbled. "I don't like these names." I thought he might talk about the incongruity of having objectives named after alcoholic beverages here in our teetotaling region of Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan. This *was* the birthplace of the Taliban, after all. Perhaps a brief reminder about cultural sensitivities being instrumental to counter insurgency. I would have even given him credit for castigating the planners who'd code-named these objectives after such rot-gut.

“I mean, if things go pear-shaped on y’all out there,” the general continued, “are we sure we’ll be able to tell the difference between Miller and Miller Lite?”

Stifled laughter thinly disguised as throat-clearing, sniffing, and other tics began sweeping the room. The briefer, a young Special Forces captain sitting just a few feet from the general, remarkably kept his composure. From the back of the room a disembodied voice finally said it.

“One tastes great, the other’s less filling, sir.” The room roared. The general, expressionless, turned slowly in his chair to face the mirthful crowd seated behind him. A hush fell over the room. Then, slowly, a constipated grin broke over the general’s face. The assembled group collectively exhaled, and the laughter came easier. The general turned in his chair again.

“Gimme that sucker,” he said to the captain who had briefed the operation. The young officer slid him a single piece of paper, and the general scratched out his signature.

Operation Low Brow Adult Carbonated Beverage went off without a hitch.

A number of my deployment memories, such as the one above, were refreshed upon reading David Abrams’ wonderful debut novel *Fobbit*. Set in Iraq in 2005, this hilarious read from the former public affairs soldier depicts in detail much of the frivolous nonsense that takes place “in the rear.” Indeed, combat division headquarters have long been the object of warfighters’ scorn, ridicule, and disgust. In his Pulitzer-Winning *Army At Dawn*, Rick Atkinson invokes a catchy phrase circulated among frontline troops about the Allied Forces Headquarters in World War II: “Never we so few commanded by so many from so far.” *Fobbit* makes clear that this tradition of contemptuousness for a bloated, chair-borne headquarters staff continues unabated into present day.

“Fobbit” is the derisive term “real” soldiers and Marines assign the thousands of PowerPoint rangers, memo-writers, and spreadsheet updaters comfortably ensconced within the relative safety of the enormous forward operating bases, or FOBs, which once dotted the landscape of Iraq, and which persist in a half dozen or so places in Afghanistan today. But uniforms, tax-free wages, and hostile fire pay are just about the only things fobbits have in common with the true warfighters. “Crack open their chests,” Abrams, a self-described former fobbit himself, writes in the book’s opening paragraph, “and in the space where their hearts should be beating with a warrior’s courage and selfless regard, you’d find a pale, gooey center. [...] If the FOB was a mother’s skirt, then these soldiers were pressed hard against the pleats, too scared to venture beyond her grasp.” From the novel’s outset, Abrams takes the reader behind the curtain, offering an insider’s skeptical perspective on

the cult of hero in which the profession of arms has too easily cloaked itself for the last 11-plus years of non-stop wars.

Indeed, *Fobbit* is the second war novel published within the last year or so to examine this cult, the other being Ben Fountain's National Book Award-nominated *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* ([reviewed in this journal](#) last summer). But *Fobbit* departs from *Billy Lynn* in important ways. Chief among them is that the latter offers a scathing critique of an American society which brazenly seeks to salve its collective guilt for having virtually no skin in the game—fewer than 0.5% of contemporary American society serves in the military, according to a recent [New York Times article](#). This salve emerges in the form of very public, very facile, and very fawning adulation of service members. Fountain, a former real estate attorney-turned-writer, boldly suggests in his novel that the U.S. soldier—and the country—deserves better.

But the response from the former soldier Abrams is, “*Stand by, over,*” to borrow Army parlance. Not all service members are created equal, he reminds, and he disabuses the reader early and often of the idea that merely wearing a uniform equates to being above reproach. While it is true they represent only a fraction of the population, soldiers can be just as capable of displays of egocentricity and avarice as the larger citizenry from which they are culled. And it's the soldiers committed to self-promotion over selflessness who find themselves in Abrams' crosshairs in *Fobbit*.

A handful of characters become the means by which Abrams expresses his frustration with pretense and soldierly self-absorption. There are minor figures, such as the brigade commander, Colonel Quinner, who's neither a quitter nor a winner; “He was a Quinner!” with a penchant for mindless, pithy bromides that punctuate the conclusion of every staff meeting. There is the company first sergeant, a “semi-devout Baptist” whose expletive of choice is “ding-dang,” because he “avoided profanity whenever possible.” There is a “certain sergeant major” whose cache of illicit “soft-core porn DVDs” remain carefully hidden in his footlocker, “beneath an equally healthy supply of *Our Daily Breads*.” We laugh at the benign hypocrisy these figures embody in their respective, brief treatments, but taken in total, the irritation factor steadily mounts.

One of the novel's more complex characters, meanwhile, is battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, whose philosophy is to “make it look like you're full of ballsy confidence, ready to kick the situation's ass.” But there's much more going on in Duret's head than he will ever acknowledge publicly, to include the recurring nightmarish vision of his brother-in-law Ross's flaming leap to his death from the

burning Cantor Fitzgerald offices in One World Trade Center. This disturbing image, which repeatedly besets Duret throughout the novel, is the only explicit invocation of the events of September 11th. In a recent interview with Mr. Abrams, I pressed him about the significance of Ross's gruesome demise. Abrams recognized the symbolic importance of killing this character "in the most dramatic of ways," he says:

By placing him on one of the top floors of the World Trade Center. It also worked as a nice symbol for the War on Terror overall. When I wrote those brief images of Duret's brother-in-law aflame and falling from the towers, I also saw them as a way to tie the mission in Iraq back to 9/11. In real life, of course, that tie is tenuous and dubious at best; but for Vic Duret, the link between Manhattan and Baghdad is a very personal one.

Despite his flaws, the reader sympathizes with Duret as he struggles to deal with this trauma. But not all of the book's characters move the reader so. Easily the novel's most repugnant, preposterous character is Lieutenant Colonel Eustace (Stacie) Harkleroad, "leader of men and director of media relations"—the public affairs officer responsible for the message-shaping of U.S. combat operations. At first blush, Harkleroad can almost be dismissed as a cartoon. But most who have served in the military will concede that he or she has likely encountered the type. He is a chronic nose bleeder, a condition which complements his incessant brown-nosing of superiors. He's "a thick man," we learn when we first meet him in the novel. "Thick in the way a bowl of risen dough is said to be thick." The only thing zestier than his appetite for comfort food served at the base dining hall is his inclination to embellish war stories in lengthy, rambling emails to his mother. "You've heard that old expression 'war is hell'?" he breathlessly writes. "Well, hell has nothing on this place, let me tell you! I am kept awake each night by the scream of mortars streaking across the sky." There is a delicious irony here, as it is the Army's chief spin-doctor who plays most liberally with the ground truth—in his correspondence with his mother. Talk about taking your work home with you. Even when you're deployed half a world away.

This need to burnish one's image is not the sole province of buffoons like Harkleroad, however. Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding, Harkleroad's bright and articulate subordinate, likewise has his moments of weakness. For most of the novel, the reader sympathizes with Gooding as he endures the petty tyrannies of his boss and even his peers. But when, late in the story, severe intestinal distress

sends Gooding to the first aid station, the allure of mendacity gets the better of him. After a clumsy medic botches a routine IV, Gooding finds himself “in the middle of a Wes Craven movie.” Nothing some gauze and adhesives can’t quickly remedy, though not before Gooding notices that “coin-sized drops of blood had also hit his boots. But that was okay by Gooding. When he returned to Georgia, maybe he could wear the uniform into the local American Legion and it would get him a few free beers from all the old battle-scarred veterans sitting at the bar. ‘Hey, look who’s here,’ they’d say. ‘Rambo from Iraq.’” Even the good guys know they ought not allow facts to get in the way of a good war story.

None of the novel’s characters, however, finds the concept of image re-fashioning more appealing than does Captain Abe Shrinkle. “Shrinkle was on his way toward something big, something great,” Abrams facetiously writes, “something magnanimous that would benefit his family and America at large.” Unfortunately for Shrinkle, however, “the train of ambition had been barreling down the tracks so fast Abe hadn’t seen the washed-out bridge ahead.”

Shrinkle, whose bungling cluelessness the novel traces from adolescence, to West Point, through active duty, finds himself at the epicenter of a series of spectacular blunders, which result in his being fired as a platoon commander and reassigned as towel-folder at a small fitness center on the FOB. Stripped of meaningful responsibilities, dreading the dire post-deployment punishment for the many calamities he’s authored, Shrinkle concludes he has nothing to lose. General Order Number Five, which prohibits U.S. personnel from visiting the outdoor pool located on the Aussie compound of the huge FOB, becomes negotiable for the erstwhile idealist Shrinkle. In Abrams’ deft prose, the verboten pool is transformed into a kind of absurdist baptismal font, a notion enriched by the euphemism the Aussies give their happy hour pool parties: “prayer meetings.” Shrinkle, who “had never thought of himself a man of habitual sin,” who had actually shown up to his first “prayer meeting” with a pocket-sized New Testament in tow, has an epiphany. In that moment, we read, Shrinkle “firmly decided that yes, indeed, he *would* change his identity and leave the old Abe Shrinkle behind. It was as simple as entering an elevator and watching the doors close in front of him.” Captain Abraham Lincoln Shrinkle dips himself in the magic waters of the off-limits Aussie-operated pool, and emerges as Richard Belmouth, an Englishman and “assistant curator of Babylonian antiquities at the British Museum.” Combat’s descent into complete farce is nearly complete. “Jolly good show you’ve got ‘ere, guv’nor,” Belmouth-née-Shrinkle confidently says.

Alas, Shrinkle's born-again existence is short lived. But there's powerful meaning embedded within these transformations—real or imagined—that each of these soldiers fashions for himself. This urge to possess a “great story” certainly isn't new; the heroes of Homer's *Iliad* challenge their peers with reminders that the battlefield is “where men win glory.” And E.B. Sledge heaps disdain on the rear-echelon frauds chasing war booty after the firing has stopped in his wonderful memoir *With the Old Breed*. “[Fobbits] can't go home with only tales about how they spent all their time repairing computers,” Abrams observes, “or how good they got playing *Halo*, or about that time they got really lucky and snagged the last bag of jalapeno-cheddar Cheet-os at the PX. There's no glory to be won there. And so they write letters home to their mothers puffing themselves up (Harkleroad), or they fantasize about FOB attacks by terrorists (Gooding), or they overcompensate for their mundanity by creating their own dangerous incidents (Shrinkle).”

NSTR. *Nothing Significant to Report*. The one-line, one-PowerPoint-slide battlefield update employed with great judiciousness from the squad to the brigade level; play that card too often and it might suggest you're not trying hard enough. But NSTR has a different connotation for the fobbit; it is at once both anathema and a personal challenge. For him, the deployment becomes a quest for importance, for meaning, for validation. Oh, I *will* have *something* significant to report; just you watch.

But perhaps these fantasies are simply expressions of escapism. This notion reminds me of another of my deployment experiences, this one much more understated than the one which opened this essay. Like *Fobbit's* Staff Sergeant Gooding, I, too, did a lot of reading and writing during my deployment to Afghanistan from 2010-2011. One book I thoroughly enjoyed was Walter Isaacson's charming biography of Albert Einstein. “One of the strongest motives that leads men to art and science,” Einstein once wrote, “is escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness.” Isaacson points out that Einstein made this statement at a time of great personal turmoil—the period during which his young family was disintegrating. It was also a time when Einstein was arguably at his most brilliant and prolific. Isaacson's point is that Einstein succeeded to use science as a “refuge from painful personal emotions.” The world of letters, meanwhile, is improved perceptibly on account of Abrams' ability to find for himself and, in turn, offer to the reader, the kind of escape—at differing times hilarious, sobering, and deeply troubling—which Einstein celebrated.

More with Fobbit author David Abrams:

WLA: There's something decidedly unglamorous about being on a huge FOB, a fact which shapes many of the characters' self-styled narratives. Shrinkle thinks about re-fashioning; Harkleroad is obsessed with it, as his lengthy e-mails to his mother make clear. Not even Gooding is immune, as he observes with some satisfaction the blood drops on his boots after the mishap with the IV in the first aid station. What might explain this compulsion to embellish?

DA: *We all have these images of combat action—planted in our heads by movies, TV shows, comic books, novels—and ordering a venti latte, light on the foam, at a Starbucks in the middle of a war zone is not one of them. Yet that's the reality of 21st-century warfare. The military tries so hard to replicate the “comforts of home” in the combat zone that it dangerously lulls warriors into a sense of complacency. A street battle with insurgents one minute and bowling at the MWR Fun Center the next can really mess with a person's head.*

For Fobbits—the ones who rarely go outside the wire—life can be comfortable, safe and mundane. The war is always “out there,” far removed from their daily lives—a distant thing that both annoys and frightens them. [...] These are the guys who'll be spinning yarns down at the American Legion bar in years to come. The guys who were out there in the real shit, facing the real bullets and grenades, they won't talk about it much.

WLA: There's a wonderful scene in which Shrinkle admonishes Gooding about reading *Catch-22* (despite the fact that Shrinkle's never read the book). Some critics—and even the blurb on the back cover of *Fobbit*—see similarities between your text and Heller's classic. To what extent are you as an author conscious of that sort of gigantic literary predecessor, and how does it affect your writing?

DA: *Let me start by saying my love for *Catch-22* is well-known and widely-publicized. It, along with *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Things They Carried*, is one of the most important pieces of war fiction from the 20th century. I would never presume to duplicate or even come close to duplicating what Joseph Heller did in that novel.*

*That being said, I'll admit that *Catch-22* was an influential book on *Fobbit*. Hell, it was the first thing I read during that deployment. I boarded the plane in Savannah, Georgia carrying a fresh paperback copy of the book; by the end of the deployment that book's spine was creased, the pages were dog-eared and the margins were graffitied*

with notes. When it came time to write Fobbit, Catch-22 was both an inspiration and a burden. It was like the proverbial elephant in the room—I knew it was there, but I tried not to look at it. I gave Heller’s novel a cameo in my novel as a sort of homage, a tip-of-the-hat to the master. That’s the only reason I mentioned Catch-22 in that swimming pool scene. Unfortunately, some critics thought I was using it as a semaphore to send a message that I was trying to compare myself with a classic. I have very few regrets about how the book turned out, but if I could go back and do it over it again, I would take out that reference to Catch-22.

WLA: What I call “The Big Three” war novels—*Fobbit*, *The Yellow Birds*, and *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*—emerging from our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were all published within a few months of each other in the spring and summer of 2012. While there have been a number of wonderful memoirs and journalistic accounts that came out quite a bit before, the fiction takes longer to gestate. We saw a similar phenomenon with Vietnam War fiction. Why is this?

DA: *I can only answer this on a personal level by saying six years is how long it took me to write and polish Fobbit. If I was a faster worker and better at distancing myself from my words to look at them objectively, Fobbit probably would have been done sooner. I started writing Fobbit while I was still in Iraq—fictionalizing a few of the more dramatic scenes from my journal—and really started in earnest on it in January 2006, a month after I’d returned from Baghdad. I needed to strike while the iron was hot, while the images and the sensory experience of the combat zone were still fresh in my head. So for me, there really wasn’t any long gestation period because I was working on it almost non-stop, save for about nine months when my energy really lagged and I got hit hard with depression. I’m not sure if that’s how it was for Kevin Powers—if he went right from the battlefield to the page—but I suspect we both felt an urgency to tell our stories. Not only did we need to get the war out of our system, but there’s also the desire to tell the rest of the world what was really going on in Iraq. Again, I can’t speak for Kevin, but if he’s anything like me, there was a clock-ticking urgency to get our books out into the world. But not until they were the best we could make them, of course. And that really shows in *The Yellow Birds*—you can tell that novel was patiently distilled through several drafts, boiled down to the essence of language, until we’re left with compressed, lyrical imagery on the page. I am, of course, a huge fan of Kevin’s book as well as Ben’s pitch-perfect satire. I’m proud to be part of that trinity of 2012 war fiction.*

WLA: Duret's brother-in-law. For me, it's one of the more powerful images of the book. It's the only place where the events of 9/11 are expressly invoked, though that invocation resists the "we're here (in Iraq) to defend our freedoms" canard often deployed when 9/11 and the Iraq War are yoked. Why does Duret frequently, and against his will, suffer from this particular vision?

DA: *I began with the strong tie between Duret and his wife and the agony of his homesickness for her. Though he sexualizes her in his daydreams, his feelings for her go deeper than just the act of flesh—he is her caretaker, her lighthouse in a stormy ocean of depression. She is a complete wreck without him—and he without her, to a degree. So, that's how I began—Duret distracted from the mission in Iraq by his wife's needs. Once I created that in early drafts of Fobbit, I thought about how I could deepen it, make it more complex. That's when the idea of creating Duret's brother-in-law came into my head.*

WLA: "Mind of West Point at work..." So says a disgusted Colonel Joshua Chamberlain in Michael Shaara's *Killer Angels*, an historical novel on the Battle of Gettysburg, after Chamberlain has just read a "damn fool order" from General Meade on the eve of battle. Your West Pointers don't come off well in your book. Is there a message there?

DA: *No, there's not a subliminal attack on West Point at work here. In my 20 years of active duty, I worked for a number of officers who came from West Point (and at least one who later taught there) and I always respected those men. I guess I chose to make Captain Abe Shrinkle and Lieutenant Fledger West Pointers because I thought they fit that stereotypical image of "academy officers" who are straitlaced and by-the-book. I wasn't trying to single out West Pointers in particular—everybody falls victim to satire at one point or another in the book. I'm an equal-opportunity offender.*

WLA: Philip Caputo observes in the beginning of *A Rumor of War* that "few of [his fellow Marines] were past twenty-five. We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads." You (and I, incidentally) bore a relatively old head to your first war. How did that fact change how you understood and processed the war in which you were participating?

DA: *I think it changed how I processed the military as a whole. I came into the Army as a 25-year-old with a college degree. The other guys in my basic training platoon called*

me “Grandpa.” There was one guy a few years older than me; they called him “Great-Grandpa.” I felt my age gave me some perspective, made it easier for me to endure the drill sergeants screaming two inches from my face. I realized early on it was all a head game; some of the younger guys in those barracks had a harder time adjusting to the fact that the drills didn’t really mean what they were saying about our mommas.

War also came late for me. I was in the autumn of my career—hell, probably in the winter of my career—when I finally deployed. I was in my 17th year of active duty when I boarded that plane for Baghdad. Here I was, an E-7 heading into combat for the first time, after nearly two decades of training exercises and rifle ranges and classroom instruction. I felt like lunchmeat that was way past its “Best When Used By” date. Most of the junior soldiers I was supervising had already deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq—some of them multiple times. They were the ones who could teach me a thing or two about how to go to war, but yet I was the NCO in charge of leading them. I stepped up to the plate with false confidence and faked my way through the first half of the deployment. So yes, I had an old head when I stepped off the plane at Baghdad International Airport, but I was a baby when it came to war. It was a very odd, stressful position to be in.



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