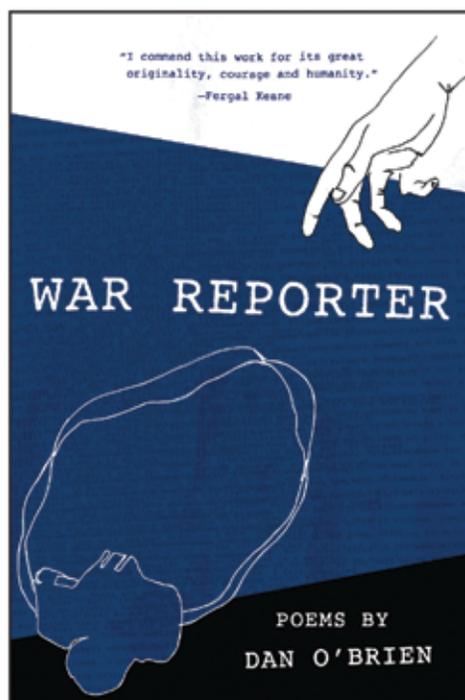


WAR REPORTER

DAN O'BRIEN



"The subject of this book is war and the pity of war—distilled into very powerful poems that are all the more affecting thanks to their clever and restraining use of personae. At once direct and detached, they make the whole notion of 'response' as much a focus of their attention at the facts of conflict."—Andrew Motion

"The book is superb, subtle, memorable, and of a piece. It sings and cries. It consoles. It is a gift to readers..."
—Jay Parini

"Dan O'Brien has discovered the poetry in the most harrowing of war stories, and made music of the ways in which we share in each other's guilts, doubts, and triumphs. Meanwhile, the poet's identity bleeds into that of war reporter, photographer, and reader. This is a tragic book about the human comedy."—Mary Jo Salter

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AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Dan O'Brien interviewed by M. K. Sukach

There is a murderer within each of us. Pushed far enough, or given the right training, even the best of us are capable of taking human life, and justifying the wrong anyway we must.

—Paul Watson, *Where War Lives*

Paul Watson is speaking to the idea that being human precedes our social, cultural, political being. In peace time or war, being human is always the antecedent condition of our existence. Dan O'Brien, author of *War Reporter*, his debut collection of poems based in part on Paul Watson's memoir, *Where War Lives*, acknowledges this same truth. In describing the way in which he hopes his book will impact audiences, O'Brien states that "whatever is 'political' here is probably secondary" to the truth that we must also connect with and communicate "the thrill of war, this dismal lust for it." This is unqualified truth as opposed to the *ugly* truth. The language of O'Brien's poetry censors such moral judgment that tends to immediately condemn what may appear as a barbaric fascination with war. In the Aristotelian sense, there are no accidents of truth. O'Brien's work faces this reality head on.

The attempt to qualify truth is to decrease our proximity to it. O'Brien's poetry directly faces the ethical complexity of recognizing the truth in ourselves and that of the Other. This encounter is also not accidental but, as Emmanuel Levinas explains, reveals an a priori necessity that makes present our difference from the Other, a difference which allows for the possibility of discourse, as well as the understanding of what we have in common, and more importantly, introduces our moral responsibility to the Other.

O'Brien's vital contribution is the necessary scrutiny of what it means to be human amidst the destruction and damage we create in the world. In "The Nihilist as Hero," one of Robert Lowell's many poems that exemplify his seeded pessimism and fire-branded irony, the speaker says, "Life by definition breeds on change, / each season we scrap new cars and wars and women." Lowell is after the same critique but in a complex and often indiscernible mixture of the voice of the political and the personal. O'Brien's address is not any less complex but far more direct in approach, the strength of which is derived in part from the tension between the journalistic, exteriorized tenor of the speaker who must document conflict and the interior voice of witness who has to live with who he has become now that he has seen of what we are capable in war.

Regardless of how some may view the media, reporters, in particular war reporters, make war centrifugal, pushing conflict in the form of stories and images outside the geography of battle. Otherwise, 1993, Mogadishu, Somalia, wouldn't exist in the same way it does for us today—it would merely have remained a silence in a wilderness in which American soldiers were fighting and dying amidst a deadly Somali civil war. O'Brien's poetry is a centrifugal force of its own, propelling one of the most "humanistic" accounts of war in contemporary poetry.

The poem that inaugurates what I feel is the central concern speaking throughout the book is titled, "The War Reporter Paul Watson Hears the Voice." The voice Paul hears is that of Staff Sergeant William David Cleveland, who was killed after going down in a Black Hawk, struck by RPG fire—an incident recreated in the film, *Black Hawk Down*, by director Ridley Scott, and based on the novel of the same title by Mark Bowden. Just prior to taking what would be his Pulitzer Prize winning photo (<http://goo.gl/4MkNzh>), Paul converses with the voice:

everything goes dim. And I hear a voice
both in my head and out. *If you do this,*
I will own you forever. I'm sorry
but I have to. *If you do this, I will*

own you. I'm sorry, I'm not trying to
desecrate your memory. *If you do this*
I will own you forever. I took his
picture.

Paul is being captured and displaced...but is willing to accept a kind of possession or haunting because he is working under the journalist's imperative: to document. This first poem asks the essential question about those who experience war, "Who are you?" War transforms the environment in destructive, often irreparable, ways but it's also in us doing damage.

I will own you forever. I took his
picture. While they were beating his body
and cheering.

The poem ends with Paul's subjective displacement, described in the poem as an out-of-body experience which I take as the moment he becomes "owned," not by the soldier, but by a deepening sense of his responsibility to the Other. If we accept that journalists endeavor to maintain objectivity in reporting, Paul's encounter jars him into the space of difference where recognition of one's self, in the face of the other, is possible. Paul's question is as much his as it is ours...it is the first question toward understanding our humanity—a humanity that has to admit to a capacity for compassion as well as an immanent, tractable potential for war.

I'm standing
outside myself. I'm watching someone else
take these pictures. Wondering, You poor man.
Who are you?

This kind of existential inquiry occurs throughout the book. If there is one central axis running through O'Brien's poem, it is the encounter with the Other. Part of Paul's mission is to capture the war in print. But his charge as a journalist is also to articulate what so often eludes the understanding, even of the soldiers in combat. When confronted with the soldiers on either side, he is forced to contend with a reversal in the equation of alterity as Emmanuel Levinas describes in his philosophy. No matter how close Paul gets, he cannot know the Other. He contends with perils of proximity to the Other, a continuum which is interrupted by his "camera"

that “covers / [his] face” and shuts “the world out,” where “everything goes dim.” The painful and revelatory aspect of Paul’s encounter is that he is aware of what separates him from the world and the Other. His camera is a source of irony that at once requires proximity, a closeness to *acquire* the subject but as a mechanical device, it obscures and separates Paul from the world and the soldier.

A photograph represents what Levinas might liken to the third person impersonal pronoun, or that which lacks an antecedent. Taken by itself, we do not know what came before the photograph, nor what happened after. As Roland Barthes describes the phenomenon, “the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.” In its utter objectivity, the photograph creates an infinity whereby nothing is knowable outside of itself. Its presence signifies an absence of the context of the subject, which we *know*, according to Barthes, as an “emanation of the referent.” For Levinas, the absence of context elides the possibility difference that allows us to begin to see ourselves in the face of the Other. Paul’s photograph, however, is by now surrounded by an historical context most know through the various narratives that have emerged through multiple genres over the past twenty years. The context the poem captures is Paul’s. Paul is the subject displaced by his experience of the event, which creates a rift between the mutilated soldier and journalist that facilitates recognition of the self through the opening of the space of difference. In the final lines of the poem, Paul is watching the scene without the lens of his camera and “everything” that went “dim” during the process of mutual possession (Paul *taking* the soldier’s photograph; the soldier’s warning that in doing so he will “own” Paul) gives way to the “hammering morning light” that breaks the obscurity of that moment where Paul stands outside himself to ask “Who are you?” What I think the poem sustains is a moment in which the hard light and harrowing shadows that form the image of what Paul saw constitute a reversal in which the soldier and the frenzied violence of the crowd continuing to beat the dead man was looking back into Paul.

WLA: What kind of damage does Paul suffer from and how is does the soldier “own” him?

O’Brien: It’s the book’s central question. I’ve simply felt its importance.

I was speaking to Paul just last week about this question of how to interpret the ghost’s use of the word “own.” He continues to hear it mostly as a threat, that he’ll be punished terribly for taking that picture, for taking part in the soldier’s desecration. Even though, it must be noted, he took that picture because the

Pentagon was denying that desecrations like this had been happening in previous weeks. Paul was very pointedly taking that picture to prove that he was telling the truth, and to perhaps force the military to change their strategies in Mogadishu—changes that might have saved the lives of soldiers like the one he photographed. And yet, of course, this justification is not enough for even Paul himself.

I suppose I was interested in the ambiguity of the ghost's statement, "I will own you." That yes, Paul would be changed forever, perhaps most likely for ill. But isn't there the possibility that it might change him in more meaningful ways? A greater sense of responsibility to the art and craft of what he does, a maturing of that impetus to go to war that in his youth was largely a thrill-seeking impetus.

WLA: Your book raises complex anthropological and existential questions. But these poems are also concerned with the nature or ontology of things—their sameness and difference. "This is you speaking though / it might as well be me." Emmanuel Levinas argued in his ethics that our subjectivity, our personhood is founded by our encounter with the Other as is our responsibility to the Other, who we can never know. How are these selves a dyad? Do they fracture? How?

O'Brien: What's moral in the book, for me, is simply the attempt to understand and experience the pain of others. To try to take it on as one's own. This endeavor has simply been artistically and emotionally—even spiritually—rewarding to me.

WLA: How did this project come about?

O'BRIEN: I heard an interview with Paul on NPR's Fresh Air discussing his career and his memoir, *Where War Lives*. And I was deeply moved by it. I felt a strong and surprising sense of identification with him, specifically with his sense of being haunted by past trauma. So I emailed him, and thankfully he emailed me back, and that turned into a couple of years of pen-pal-ship. We made plans to meet up for a week in the Canadian Arctic, on the slushy banks of the Northwest Passage, where Paul was taking a break from war reporting to cover the "arctic and aboriginal beat" for the *Toronto Star*. This was in 2010, and it was the first time we'd spoken "live." From the beginning there'd been the understanding I was going to write about him in some fashion, and so far our relationship has yielded a play (*The Body of an American*, which won the inaugural Edward M. Kennedy Prize and will be produced at the Gate Theatre in London in January), an opera (*Visitations*,

which premiered at Stanford University this year and will be part of the Prototype Festival in NYC this winter), and now this collection of poems.

WLA: I'd be interested to know some specifics about how the poems were generated. Did individual poems derive from single or multiple passages? Would you share, for example, the narrative areas of Paul's memoir from which "The War Reporter Paul Watson Talks to Himself" was derived?

O'BRIEN: I'm not always certain of the origin of these poems, in terms of specific sources. Some I can point to and say yes, that definitely came from an article of Paul's. Or from a conversation with him. Or from his memoir. And many if not most poems are derived from many sources. But at a certain point I forgot all that and I was simply trying my best to inhabit and investigate Paul's experience with my own imagination. "The War Reporter Paul Watson Talks to Himself" is, I believe, entirely imagined, inspired by simply spending time with him, getting to know him, though I could be wrong. After years of working with him and his material, it's quite easy for me to "think" in the persona or character of "Paul Watson"—a character who is, of course, quite different in many ways from the real Paul Watson. For example, the real Paul is a very measured, considered speaker and thinker, whereas I tend to think and speak more kinetically, manically at times, via association and metaphor.

WLA: On occasion I'll hear poetry and photography likened to each other. But the connection always seem to break down the deeper one gets into the nature of form and content, how things are captured and presented. What differentiates poems from photos? Why "reproduce" a memoir in poems?

O'BRIEN: I'm in awe of photographers. But poetry is so personal, and positions us inside the skin of someone, if you will. Photography does this by implication perhaps, but these poems are so much about consciousness, memory, the internal life of a man who's lived an externalized life. It should be noted that Paul describes himself as a "reporter who happens to carry a camera." Though he's most well-known for a photograph, he considers himself a writer whose pictures are just "snapshots"—though I often disagree with him as to their artistic value.

Why a memoir translated, if you will, into poems? I'm not entirely sure. Though it felt natural and right to do so. (And again, this is only a portion of the book. Much of *War Reporter* bears no direct relation to Paul's memoir.) That said, I was

moved and disturbed by Paul's book. I was left with a hunger to know this person on a deeper level, to re-investigate his life via my own perspective, experience, my sameness and difference. That's why *War Reporter* is not, I hope, merely a poetic illustration of Paul Watson's life, but something stranger, something that says or reveals something about the mystery of connection.

WLA: As a writer, what language does the self use to cope with war? Is there a poetics of trauma? If so, do you see the narrative poem or more lyrically, perhaps dissociative forms better suited to handle war?

O'BRIEN: Poetry, and writing in general, but poetry mostly, has always been the best way to try to deal with trauma. But as a playwright who writes poems and short fiction, and poems and plays that are close to documentary, my conception of genre boundaries is fuzzy at best. Which I like. It's all storytelling to me.

WLA: How do you approach poems like "The War Reporter Paul Watson's Psychiatrist Takes Note," which creates multiple layers through voice? Not sure how they would be ordered but here we have the voice of the speaker speaking through the notes/voice of the psychiatrist all of which is derived from Paul's voice. How do you work all these voices out?

O'BRIEN: That poem is derived from an audio recording Paul shared with me. When he was researching his memoir he wanted very much to "get it right," in an almost journalistic sense. So he interviewed the psychiatrist he'd had in Johannesburg around the time he'd taken his Pulitzer photo. This recorded interview was maybe a decade later. Anyway, Paul recorded Dr. Grinker simply leafing through his old notes. The doctor's words, in highly distilled fashion—and distilled in a highly subjective sense—became the rough draft of this poem. Then it was just a question of deepening, sharpening the experience of the poem. There wasn't any conscious effort to filter it through Paul's consciousness, but by then the Paul "character" had become pretty second nature to me.

WLA: "Joy / is terror." When we create metaphor, we often hope to produce first, second, third order effects. We hope to deepen the thing that is only possible because we say, to paraphrase the Vedas, "this is verily that." However, often we don't want to encourage ambiguity...we need the metaphor to hit a target, as it were. Could you talk about how joy is terror?

O'BRIEN: Maybe I'm revealing too much of my playwriting background here, but often I'm thinking mostly of the character. It simply made sense to me that this person, the translator who is hopefully going to receive news of his emigration papers coming through today, and yet who is also going to have to venture out into the city where he could very well be targeted and killed by Taliban—it made sense to me that he'd feel both joy and terror at once. That they would feel almost like the same thing. In a larger sense, also, the joy of possible escape from danger in Kandahar, to the terror of being alone and unemployed in Canada.

WLA: “The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Economy of War” highlights a resourceful but sordid and exploitative recycling effort. In 2012, opium accounted for roughly \$2.4 billion (15% of Afghanistan's licit GDP) in revenue—only a small part of the estimated \$68 billion in worldwide dollars. How do you respond to the phrase “war for profit?”

O'BRIEN: In certain moods I respond with outrage. In other moods I feel fatalistic. That war is simply a ramping up of inchoate instincts that guide most everyone in every culture every day. I suspect that a moral war, where one entire group of people is morally toxic and deserving of annihilation, has never existed.

WLA: Like some of the better volumes I've come across recently, these poems are certainly political but unbiased—save against war itself. In your poems, the “Peacekeepers” are shown to be just as depraved as what some could only imagine of the “enemy.” What is the role of poetry in politics and what impact do you envision your book having on your audience?

O'BRIEN: Even being “against war” is ambiguous here. Just yesterday at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, where I'm teaching playwriting, I had the good fortune of hearing Tim O'Brien read “How to Tell a True War Story” from *The Things They Carried*. It was heart-breaking, beautiful. Obscene at times, as it should be. It was “a love story,” as Tim read with an undeniable catch in his voice. But if I remember correctly that story advises us not to trust the “anti-war” story as being truthful. The war reporter Aidan Hartley has written about experiencing countless epiphanies every day while living by his wits and luck in a war zone. So communicating the thrill of war, this dismal lust for it—that's important here too. That's why I hope *War Reporter* is a deeply humanistic book, and whatever

is “political” here is probably secondary. Being anti-war is like being anti-death, probably.

WLA: The poem about the stoning again brings up the question of the reportage of atrocity, the necessary objectivity of journalists, and censorship. I’m remembering *Time Magazine’s* 9 Aug 10 cover which featured the mutilated portrait of Bibi Aisha. Here’s what I want to say about your poem...I’m not sure I believe Paul in this instance. I’d like to be mistaken...could you help me understand what was going on for Paul and why he “did not want the world / to see.” This moment appears to be one in which the self turns into its own censor...for the sake of the public?

O’BRIEN: I’m interested in hearing more about your response here, as to what you don’t believe in Paul’s recounting of the story. (I don’t mean this in a challenging way, I’m really curious—and wondering if I’ve missed something here.) He claims that it was simply too gruesome a scene to photograph, and he didn’t want to be used by fundamentalists, to give publicity to their—in his opinion—barbaric approach to punishment. Paul is nothing if not a feminist, so it’s not that he felt sympathy for these rapists. But it’s interesting to me that he had and has an internal censor, perhaps as a result of his experience in Mogadishu, perhaps not.

When I saw Paul last week he told me a story from Mogadishu, however, of another photograph he didn’t take: two children, two boys, pulling by ropes the cadaver of another US ranger through the streets in the week after the Black Hawk Down disaster. It would have obviously been a striking, shocking picture. Paul describes these young boys as having eyes that looked “evil.” But he felt there was no reason to take it, in terms of the news, and perhaps, also, it was simply too depressing. So he didn’t take that picture.

WLA: What do you think your book offers the audience that the memoir does not?

O’BRIEN: Hopefully what’s different has everything to do with the difference between poetry and prose. Neither better nor worse. But poetry, or the poetry I like, is often painfully intimate and above all honest, confiding. Confessional, I guess. Perhaps it brings the reader closer to the emotions of the experience than prose could. Paul is an excellent journalist, so his outward gaze is well-honed. I’m a very internal, psychologized writer (and person)—sometimes to a fault—and

fundamental to our connection is discovering what each of our strengths can bring out in the Other's work.

The book is just as much about someone like me, with no direct experience of war, trying to relate to someone like Paul, who has been made and marked by war. From the beginning of our work I've had the half-formed theory that our culture is haunted by war because so many of us have had the luxury and privilege of evading military service. War affects some of us very deeply, but the vast majority live their lives and pursue their careers as if thousands aren't being killed and killing, trillions being spent, etc. Trillions that could be spent creating, not destroying. So I think our culture is haunted by war. In that it's largely unconscious and we're afraid of it, in denial of it. In this sense this book of poems might be a ghost story in a way that Paul's memoir can't.

M. K. SUKACH is an active duty officer in the United States Air Force. His fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of journals to include *Poetry Northeast*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Hamilton Stone Review*, *Connotation Press*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Construction Magazine*, and others.

DAN O'BRIEN is a playwright and poet living in Los Angeles. His play *The Body of an American* premiered in 2012 and received the inaugural Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama. *War Reporter* was shortlisted for the UK's Forward Prize for Best First Collection.

DAN O'BRIEN

The War Reporter Paul Watson on the Bombing of the Dead

A snow-silenced cemetery adjacent
to the fuel depot. A bomb blast blots out
the memory field. Resurrected knuckles
knock on windowpanes. The jawless cranium
of a child spins in a dormant garden.
Femurs in latrine mud. Coffins rising
are broken rafts on a frozen wake. Whorls
of air bore through names and dates. Remorseful
statuary angels wade into bone
like a stony strand. A specter in black
sits rocking and waiting for the roaring
jets to pass, a naked cadaver rests
at her feet. *My son*, she wails. *Why would they
do this to us? You can not kill the dead
again.*

The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Chief's Embrace

One in the afternoon, Pashtun police
are fondling bodies at the gate. Chieftains
with uprooted beards, turbans like nests, dust
on the wagging tongues of their shoes. Gossip
on conference room couches, slurping mint tea,
collecting cell messages while casting
aspersive glances. The police chief laughs
as he embraces. Slings tobacco juice
at his brass spittoon. Hero of the war
against the Soviets. With cars exploding
down the road, the road itself exploding
en route to the airfield. Ambulances
exploding the dead. Says the Taliban
is almost finished. *Most murders are due
to squabbling families. Everyone's hoping
to join us now!* Two in the afternoon
a man in the slate uniform's waiting
inside the gate for the chief to step out
into this mudbrick cube of blaring light
till they embrace. Cold cylinders pressing
into the chief's belly. Wrestling settling
of ball bearings and nails. The man fumbling
with something like a shutter trigger till
both men explode. Chunks of their corpses rain
down like burning logs. Shouts, windsprints. Separate
astonishments. This blast has taken several
with them, but everybody's been wounded
who survives.