

TY HAWKINS

**Bobbie Ann Mason's *The Girl in the Blue Beret*
Aesthetic Experimentation, Evil, and American
Cultural Memory of "The Good War"**

Bobbie Ann Mason's latest novel, *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, appeared in 2011 to positive reviews. Readers remark that the novel underscores Mason's long-established capacity to craft rounded, believable characters and tense, intriguing plotlines. In the main, these critics are correct: *The Girl in the Blue Beret* is a vehicle wherein Mason showcases her considerable skill with mimetic form and reanimates her commitment to the quest as a way of plotting a story and a life. More specifically, Mason's novel represents protagonist Marshall Stone, a World War II veteran who served as a B-17 co-pilot before being shot down by the Germans in 1944, trying to come to terms with his war service, as well as the death of his wife, Loretta, and his forced retirement in 1980 from commercial piloting at the age of 60. Over the course of the novel, Stone returns to Europe and reconstructs the details of his crash in Belgium, as well as his evasion of the Nazis through that country, France, and Spain. Stone also will find and thank members of the French Resistance who saved his life.¹ By novel's end, Stone even will have fallen in love with a former *résistant*, the now-widowed Annette, whom initially he remembers as a teenager sporting a blue beret as part of her school uniform. More to the point, Stone remembers Annette as a heroine who undermined German authority in Nazi-occupied Paris by helping to conceal downed American airmen and shepherd them to safety.

In a concise and lucid review of the novel that appeared in *The Washington Post* in June 2011, Ron Charles compares *The Girl in the Blue Beret* to Mason's 1985 novel,

In Country, noting, “Mason’s fans know she has addressed the lingering effects of war before.” For Charles, the upshot of the newer work is how “once again, Mason has plumbed the moral dimensions of national conflict in the lives of individual participants and produced a deeply moving, relevant novel.”² What Charles does not clarify in his otherwise strong review is precisely to what the novel is “relevant,” beyond the implication that an exploration of war trauma should be relevant to a nation that has been at war in near-perpetuity for a century. What I argue below is that while I am not as enthralled with the artistry of Mason’s novel as are many reviewers, I believe it to be “relevant,” too.

The Girl in the Blue Beret is detailed in some areas to the point of tedium. This suggests difficulty on Mason’s part in subordinating the demands of history to artistry. Moreover, the novel is uneven at times, and wooden at others, in terms of how it strikes a reader’s—or at the very least, this reader’s—affective registers.³ All this said, *The Girl in the Blue Beret* is a fascinating experiment in “postmemory,” in the sense that Marianne Hirsch defines that concept to be “a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.”⁴ For Hirsch, who builds on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, trauma and its transference best can be represented by way of “reparative readings,” which she describes as follows:

Unlike “paranoid reading,” which is “anticipatory,” “monopolistic,” “demystifying, and confident in exposing a “true knowledge,” “reparative reading” offers alternative ways of knowing. In the terms of postmemory, it might offer possibilities of knowing that are, in Sedgwick’s terms, “contingent,” “additive,” and “accretive,” “mutable.” Such a reparative approach to memory would be open to connective approaches and affiliations—thinking different historical experiences in relation to one another to see what vantage points they might share or offer each other for confronting the past without allowing its tragic dimensions to overwhelm our imagination at the present and the future.⁵

With *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, Mason offers us a flawed but significant “reparative reading” of the horrors we tend to subsume beneath an American cultural memory that constructs World War II as “the Good War.” To borrow Hirsch’s term, it is the “structure” of Mason’s reading that most interests me here.⁶

In the novel, Mason uses a three-fold approach to representing the trauma World War II begot and which impacts us today. This approach enables inter- and intra-generational empathy, while at the same time discouraging assimilation and appropriation. First, Mason capitalizes on her mastery of realist craft to enable identification on the part of readers and characters, who come to share a common plot, thanks to Mason's verisimilitude. Second, Mason inserts into her narrative a series of rhetorical questions—both explicit and implicit questions—that interrupt what John Gardner might call the novel's "fictional dream."⁷ Because these questions interrupt the novel's fictional dream, they call readers' and characters' attention to the artifice that is Mason's artistry, reminding us that Mason's story is not coterminous with our lives or life as such. Finally, just as she is working to balance the demands of identification and individuation, or inclusion and exclusion, as it were, Mason confronts an irreducible otherness peculiar to this war. That is, she confronts the evil that is the Holocaust and shows how it cannot be assimilated into our present. Hence, the novel rightly renders World War II a part of us, even as wartime trauma remains as it should be—radically other and, in a profound sense, non-transferable.

In an author's note that appears in the book's prefatory materials, Mason writes that the wartime experiences of her father-in-law inspired the novel. Among the memories of her father-in-law on which she draws is one of "a teenager he would remember as 'the girl in the blue beret.'"⁸ At the same time, Mason tells us that her novel "is nonetheless a work of fiction," before offering legalistic disclaimers of that sort typically attendant to such statements. She then dedicates the novel to a "Michèle Agniel" and a "Barney Rawlings," the former the "real" girl in the blue beret, while the latter is her actual father-in-law. Hence, we see that beginning with the prefatory matter, Mason juxtaposes seemingly contradictory claims, at once making an appeal to authenticity, while at the same time foregrounding the fictive nature of her fiction. Rather than reconciling these claims—which is to say, rather than affirming a binary opposition between mimesis and metafiction, before picking a side—Mason's novel will demand that we accept a dialectical exchange between the two. Given as much, we can say that Mason's newest novel continues the work of *In Country*, wherein we find, as Suzy Clarkson Holstein writes, "a blurring of fiction and fact [that] foregrounds the impossibility of truly unmediated experience and the increasing overlap between individual memory and mass-media expression."⁹ Like *In Country* before it, Mason's new novel requires that readers accept dialectics of knowing and not-knowing, and real and imagined.¹⁰

In keeping with this idea, Mason offers us a paean to youth from Wordsworth's "The Prelude" as an epigraph, before opening the novel proper with her World War II veteran and unhappily retired commercial pilot Stone, now well past middle-age, having returned to the site of his B-17 crash. Stone is something of a paradox, by turns warm and taciturn, eager to connect and retreating, ready for action and ferociously analytical. On a grander scale, Stone is capable of self-less heroism, but he also has a habit of treating other people, especially women, as disposable. Also, he can be wonderfully adventurous, yet he lacks interest in connecting much at all with his two grown children. Most likely, at least a number of Stone's qualities that I have enumerated strike familiar notes for readers. He is a character who embodies traits that adhere to what we think we know of "The Greatest Generation" generally and World War II veterans specifically. Moreover, the culmination of his tour of duty—shot down trying to liberate Western Europe from unremitting tyranny in an undeniably just war, before being rescued by equally heroic figures of the *résistance*, the best of the New World and the Old World coming together to save civilization—all of this should sound like pretty familiar Good War stuff. In sum, these aspects of Mason's novel tend to recapitulate what John Bodnar calls the "traditional" public memory of World War II, with even Stone's negative character traits appearing to be the unavoidable, if unfortunate, costs of confronting a difficult world with proper toughness and stoicism. As Bodnar writes, "This [traditional] perspective saw World War II not as a human tragedy but as an opportunity for Americans to assume a position of dominance in the world and reaffirm their innate (and traditional) moral courage and bravery."¹¹ Yet Mason does something interesting with American cultural memory here that resembles her earlier work with our memory of the Vietnam War. She neither unthinkingly affirms this memory, nor does she don the mantle of "critique" and commence a radically deconstructive project. Rather, Mason explores additive possibilities relevant to our cultural memory of World War II, blending mimesis, with its identificatory potential; a quest structure, which furthers identification; the rhetorical questions I mentioned earlier, which break identification; and an exploration of evil that succeeds precisely because it fails to deliver closure. In *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, World War II proves to be what we "knew" it was and many more things besides. Mason creates a superimposition of sorts, beginning with her secondhand version of her father-in-law's stories and adding onto them her narrative's own internal logic and our cultural memory of the war. In this way, the novel's "reparative reading" connects contemporary readers to the past, while also offering a possibility that those who lived this past might feel as Stone does in

returning to Paris, where, as Mason writes, “his own history emanate[s] from him, as if he had been holding it condensed in a small spot inside himself” (12).

In many ways, it is America’s contemporary historical moment—a post-Vietnam War, decade-into-the-war on terror moment—that occasions Mason’s reparative work. Stone’s forced retirement functions as a metonym for this. He is furious about what he sees as arbitrary ageism driving the federal law that grounds commercial pilots at sixty. Having established this, Mason tell us that, “For years, Marshall had dreaded retirement. [. . .] Asking a pilot to stop flying was like asking a librarian to burn books. Or a pianist to close the lid forever. Or a farmer to buy a condo in the city. His mind entertained new metaphors every day” (13). Mason further tells us that Stone struggles to think of something to do in retirement that will offer him the adrenaline rush and sense of purpose flying provided. As she writes, he is not interested in “half-hearted substitutions” and “thought hobbies were silly” (13). Yet a reader cannot help but notice that Stone’s career itself is a “half-hearted substitution” for the true transcendence of warring above the clouds with a worthy opponent. In fact, Mason states that Stone’s son, Albert, once taunted his father by calling him a “bus driver” (16). In truth, Stone really is nostalgic for the war—its sense of mission and its ability to offer absolutes: good guys and bad guys, right and wrong, heroes and villains and cowards, life and death. Moreover, his nostalgia functions in representative relationship to American nostalgia after Vietnam (when the novel is set) and today—Americans’ desire to reclaim a pre-Vietnam War understanding of national purpose in which righteousness and power operate symbiotically. Therefore, this novel’s quest to re-embodiment the past also is one of making sense of the present. Mason shows us that American war sometimes has been and indeed can be just and heroic. At the same time, the novel underlines Hemingway’s famous assertion that all war is a crime. Furthermore, by setting the novel in 1980 and including several allusions to the Vietnam War—as well as sympathetic and nuanced, if brief, portrayals of its veterans—Mason raises the specter of unjust American war, even as she undercuts the privilege of nonveterans to judge heroism or the lack thereof from a position of physical remove and retrospective predestination.

Throughout the novel, then, readers follow Stone-the-man—as opposed to Stone-the-hero or Stone-the-villain—on his sense-making quest. We see that much of Stone’s postwar life of home and hearth in the New Jersey suburbs equated to playacting. The Stone who is and was most alive is the co-pilot who flew B-17 runs against the Germans. As Mason writes, “That he didn’t get to fly more missions was like a cruel coitus interruptus” (23). Re-embodiment his war, for Mason’s

novel, means the creation of a simulacrum of war's sensory overload—which is to say, a simulacrum of war's erotics—that acknowledges its own limits. The novel represents the young Stone only through the sixty-year-old version; hence, the bodily experience of war the novel offers always already is mediated. Simulacrum or not, though, this bodily experience is by turns wistful, rueful, thrilling, harrowing, sexy, boring, and outright terrifying. Not surprisingly, Stone's recollections of battle are intense. Yet his quest to reclaim his war also is intense, a working-out of possibilities that is at once synthetic and generative. Mason offers as an analogue to her narrative strategy the nature of a pilot's memory, which she characterizes thusly:

The particulars of experience often escaped him, but the outlines and the shapes of landscapes and skylines lingered in his mind. It was a discipline gained from flying, in always knowing where the North Star was, where the horizon lurked, which way was up. He had learned the outlines of airfields, the configurations of runways, the placement of hangars, the skylines of cities, the gentle curve of the ocean horizon, the wheeling constellations overhead. (113)

Of course, the outline of the war he most remembers is that of Annette sporting her blue beret.

For Stone, youth, hope, the courage of the Resistance, and his own courage coalesce in the image of Annette. He recalls her as so:

his first sight of Annette had formed his chief impression of her, the one that stayed with him. It was her confidence, the way she strode across the crowded station, gliding past German soldiers. It was her carriage, the way she sported her beret as if it were high fashion, not a mundane piece of a school uniform. It was her liveliness, her self-assurance. And yet she was so young. He had immediately felt that he should protect her, not vice versa. (140)

Over the course of the novel, Stone and we readers will find the now-grown and recently widowed Annette. She and he share stories, become close, and strike up a sexual relationship, the plot of Mason's novel increasingly pointing toward a Hollywood ending for Stone, Annette, America, the French, and the Good War. Something in him balks at all of this, however, and by calling attention to as much,

Mason foreshadows difficulties down the road. As she writes, “He had readjusted his memory. It seemed odd to him that memory was so malleable, that what he had thought was true could be revised, like a flight plan” (234). With implicit rhetorical questions such as we find here—Mason asks us, Can memory ever be trusted?—the novel breaks its own momentum. The text also asks explicit rhetorical questions to the same end, filtering these through Stone’s consciousness, such as when Mason writes, “With millions of people misremembering a war, could anyone ever get straight what had happened?” (242).

The breaks in the novel’s fictional dream that Mason’s questions engender interrupt a slide on readers’ and characters’ parts from empathic identification with others’ trauma to the appropriation of that trauma by way of an excessive confidence that derives from a sense of shared “understanding.” Therefore, we can say that Mason both enables understanding and renders it provisional. Interestingly, though, these breaks actually carry their own narrative thrust, insofar as they prepare readers for a confrontation with the irreducible otherness of World War II. Were we to follow the recent tracks of Terry Eagleton down a very old path, we would call this otherness “evil,” as I do above. For Eagleton, evil stands outside causation by taking aim at causation itself. In his recent book, *On Evil* (2010), Eagleton defines “evil” as ontologically pure negation—negation as telos—writing, “Evil as I see it is indeed metaphysical, in the sense that it takes up an attitude toward being as such, not just toward this or that bit of it. Fundamentally, it wants to annihilate the lot of it.”¹² For Eagleton, the Holocaust is an archetypal example of evil, not just because it was terrible, but rather because taken as a totality, its fundamental purpose was the destruction of humanity. Hence, the Holocaust specifically and evil generally actually are purposeless, given that embedded in the achievement of their aims is their own elimination from the world. He argues,

One of the most grotesque features of the Nazi death camps was the way in which sober, meticulous, utilitarian measures were pressed into the service of an operation which had no practical point at all. [. . .] Some would claim that the so-called Final Solution was not in fact without purpose. [. . .] It is worth noting, however, that you do not need to kill six million people to manufacture a bogeyman. In any case, people can be scapegoated without being eradicated. In fact, the two ends are ultimately irreconcilable. If you dispose of your scapegoat, you will need to find a substitute. So what, after all, was the Final Solution a solution to?¹³

Here, Eagleton follows in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, who half a century ago brilliantly elucidated what she calls “the anti-utilitarian character of the totalitarian state structure.” Arendt also clarifies why we struggle to accept this structure’s fundamental purposelessness, arguing, “The reason why the totalitarian regimes can get so far toward realizing a fictitious, topsy-turvy world is that the outside nontotalitarian world [. . .] indulges [. . .] in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity [. . .].”⁴ Put differently, in trying to “understand” totalitarian evil, the nontotalitarian world pursues a fool’s errand.

Later in *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, we learn, along with Stone, that Annette is a survivor of the German death camps. When we do so, we find ourselves dumbstruck, as does he. Mason writes, “He had no idea what he should say or do when he saw Annette. Nightmare newsreels ran through his mind. Piles of skeleton people, bulldozers coming toward them, one or two arms waving feebly. [. . .] How did she ever survive?” (245). The horror of Annette’s trauma cannot be fully assimilated into Mason’s novel. Annette does tell Stone a version of her experience, however, and Mason describes the effects of this story on him as follows:

He did not know if, in telling her story, she was offering him a gift or transferring a burden. His ears and eyes and heart were not sharp enough to catch fully all that Annette was telling him. He could not grasp the depths of her story. [. . .] She replenished the wine, and the wine made him feel easier with her, drawn to her like someone reaching across an abyss. (260)

Stone and we readers become responsible to Annette’s story by listening to it. At the same time, we do not and cannot fully understand this story, which means we never own this story. Annette’s tale defies causality, which is the very warp and woof of realist aesthetics. In fact, Annette’s tale defies total dematerialization into any kind of a language she could share fully with us—which means she simply cannot fully share the story with us—as well as bodily transference, as Stone discovers even while his connection to Annette deepens.

Annette tells Stone at one point, in terms similar to what we find in Eagleton,

“What I hated most about the German soldiers and officers was the way they could be perfectly polite in one moment and coldly brutal in the next, as if that were the rule. They followed rules. Now you will be correct. Now you will be violent. The French love rules, but of course we mean

the rule of civilization, not of barbarity. The Nazis behaved as if barbarity could follow rules, and that therefore it could be normal. That's the difference. Or, that's what I used to think, but . . ." (281, author's ellipsis).

Here, Annette shares her realization that Nazi totalitarianism represented an existential threat to the humanity of human beings. That is, Annette realizes that, as Arendt argued, "Facticity itself depends for its continued existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world."⁵ The Nazi project aimed at the total eradication of agency, such that the human is eliminated from a world from which history itself is eliminated; totalitarian evil replaces history with momentum, and human beings become little more than responses to stimuli, caught in this momentum and reduced to mere registers of and for it. This is the nature of barbarity's normalization, which, of course, is oxymoronic. This also is what Annette still struggles to accept, as Mason indicates by pointing to Annette's uncertainty at the end of this passage of dialogue. Put succinctly, Annette still is trying to grasp the ungraspable—to understand that the normalization of evil is a contradiction in terms. In sum, something of Annette's experience—along with that of Stone, the novel's other characters, and the war itself—must remain forever other, *because evil by definition is other*. As Annette tells Stone,

"The war is always with me, and yet it is not with me. I have wanted to remember and wanted to forget. Is it not true for you, as well? My own past seems like a stranger's sometimes. It has so little to do with how things are now. Now I live normally. Then, nothing was normal." (249)

Nevertheless, Mason's narrative and the demands of history bind Annette's experiences and the war itself to the novel's readers. We all come to share this war, even as its evil—and the trauma that evil engendered—remains properly beyond assimilation and appropriation.

Notes

1 For an outstanding reading of Mason's work to re-vivify the quest as a way of knowing, even as she meets various challenges common to postmodernity that are relevant to such knowing, see Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, "Minimalism, Post-Humanism, and the Recovery of History in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail*," *Southern Literary Journal* 39.1 (2006) 98-118. Collado-Rodríguez proves particularly insightful when he delineates how Mason's fiction—especially her more-recent work—"opens some hopes for the emergence of a society where humanity may displace the enormous power of simulacra." In Collado-Rodríguez, 101. See also Drewey Wayne Gunn, "Initiation, Individuation, *In Country*," *Midwest Quarterly* 38.1 (1996): 59-72.

2 Ron Charles, review of *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, by Bobbie Ann Mason, *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2011, Web, 5 Oct. 2013.

3 In his review of *The Girl in the Blue Beret* for *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Daniel Swift captures something of what I mean, writing that for this novel, "Inside every characterization lurks the possibility of parody." Despite this, Swift finds that the novel "also, and quite oddly, [is] sincere and well-meant." In Daniel Swift, "A World War II Veteran Revisits His Saviors," review of *The Girl in the Blue Beret*, by Bobbie Ann Mason, *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 22 July 2011, Web, 10 July 2014.

It is this quality in Mason's work—the sense that she straddles lines between sincerity and sentimentality, and between characters and caricatures—that Mark S. Graybill explores in his insightful, revisionist reading of *In Country* as "one of the most radical novels to appear in the last twenty years." In Mark S. Graybill, "Reconstructing/Deconstructing Genre and Gender: Postmodern Identity in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* and Josephine Humphrey's *Rich in Love*," *Critique* 43.3 (2002): 248.

4 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012) 5-6.

5 *Ibid.*, 24-25.

6 In reading Mason in light of "postmemory," my work responds to that of Sinéad McDermott, who argues that *In Country* is a narrative that attempts to "imagine what an ethical postmemory would look like: characterized by a nonappropriative empathy, by a recognition of sameness and difference, and by the possibility of hope." In Sinéad McDermott, "The Ethics of Postmemory in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 39.2 (2006): 19.

7 For his explication of this idea, see John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage, 1984). Gardner repeats the phrase "fictional dream" several times in the text.

8 Bobbie Ann Mason, *The Girl in the Blue Beret* (2011; rpt. New York: Random House, 2012). For all subsequent references to this text, I will use in-text citations.

9 Suzy Clarkson Holstein, "Into the Swamp at Oblique Angles: Mason's *In Country*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 54.3 (2001): 330.

10 Kathryn B. McKee writes convincingly of how in Mason's fiction honest characters—and by extension, honest readers—are those who understand the present's "separation from and its continuation of what has come before." In Kathryn B. McKee, "Doubling Back: Finding Bobbie Ann Mason's Present in Her Past," *Southern Literary Journal* 31.1 (1998): 43. Timothy D. O'Brien also offers worthy insight about how the "authorial values" of *In Country* valorize "embracing oppositions, acknowledging the impossibility of neat closure even while seeking that closure, [and] rethinking neat gender boundaries [. . .]." In Timothy D. O'Brien, "Oppositions in *In Country*," *Critique* 41.2 (2000): 184.

11 Bodnar contends that this traditional view displaced a "critical" public memory of the war that foregrounds its horror and sees the war as evidence that the world must move away from mechanized mass death as a means of problem-solving. For Bodnar, the traditional view also displaced a humanitarian public memory of World War II that stresses internationalist commitments grounded in a belief in the universal equality of man—a public memory whose chief architect, Bodnar shows, was President Franklin Roosevelt. For Bodnar, during the postwar era, "When it came to remembering World War II, Americans preferred to retain a sense of how dissimilar they were from the mass of people with whom they shared the planet." In John Bodnar, *The "Good War" in American Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010) 4, 7.

12 Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010) 16.

13 Ibid., 96-98.

14 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; rev. ed. Cleveland: Meridian, 1958) 411, 437.

15 Ibid., 388.

Author's Note: This essay is an expansion of a paper the author presented at the 2013 American Literature Association Symposium on "War and American Literature," which convened in New Orleans during October 2013. Walsh University supported this research with a Faculty Scholar Award during the summer of 2014. I thank both the conference organizers and my university for their interest in my work and their generosity.

TY HAWKINS is Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at Walsh University of Ohio. He is the author of *Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror* (Palgrave 2012), as well as a number of essays on American literature generally and the literature and rhetoric of American warfare specifically. His scholarship appeared in WLA in both 2009 and 2012.