

Book Reviews

***Cherry*. Nico Walker. Knopf, 2018. \$17.67, 317 pp.**

Reviewed by Jason Poudrier
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I first heard of *Cherry* by Nico Walker, a story about a soldier who served in Iraq, like me, on NPR, and I thought, I've got to read this book, and although it is a work of fiction, it is the most realistic personal version of an Iraq war story I've read to date. There is no lens of gallantry in which the unnamed protagonist's experiences are filtered through. Instead the footage of action and emotion is raw, uncut and profane in truth and language. With the terseness of a modern Hemingway and a healthy dose of absurd humor, the narrative moves with a steady beat, one terse line after the next as the unnamed protagonist tries to hang on to his humanity and the love of his life, Emily, through the turmoil of enlistment, deployment, reintegration, and addiction. Like many great novels, *Cherry* is a love story full of desire and pain.

The novel is written from the single first-person perspective of *Cherry's* unnamed protagonist, an unreliable narrator, who tries to maintain a grip on reality. He is depicted as a non-descript army enlistee, white male from a middle-class family, who experimented with drugs while in school and college. He then enlists in the army because he'd been saying he would (52). While serving he gets "punched in the balls. As a Joke. An Army Joke" (84), a joke that I experienced as well more than once, and that ball-punched feeling is the awoken, painful reality Walker invokes in readers as the protagonist suffers one metaphorical ball hit after the next.

The book is structured in six parts, prefaced with a short prologue that foreshadows what happens at the end of the novel. The first two sections, "When Life was just Beginning, I saw You" and "Adventure," focus on pre-deployment times. In part one, boy meets girl, the protagonist first meets Emily: "I didn't ever miss English though. Emily was in my English class. The class was shit, but I always went because Emily'd be there" (19).

Part two follows the narrator from the time he first talks to his recruiter to the moment before he deploys, and he and Emily "cry like babies till it was time for [him] to go" (97). During his initial military training, the protagonist depicts his failed attempts to embody the esprit de corps embraced by the soldiers around him because to him it's all too artificial. As the company recites its warrior medic "sixteen-line cheer . . . in its entirety," he states, "it got to be expected that the guidon bearer would do the robot throughout the refrain. So don't ever join the fucking Army" (68). Likewise, while standing in formation after spending a night with Emily, he depicts an inability to embody the ideal soldier's toughness, stating, "I was trying to act like I was tough because I thought I was tough and I was supposed to be tough. But I wasn't" (73). Eventually he does have a small moment of pride in himself as he makes it through his warrior medic clinicals "without accidentally murdering anyone" (84) at Brooke Army Medical Center. However, none of these experiences could prepare him for what he was about to experience in Iraq. After his initial training, and finding out he is being attached to a combat unit, he marries Emily before he deploys, just as some of my battle buddies married their high school sweethearts before my unit deployed, not out of love, but because of timing and the benefits of extra pay and health care.

The third section is the title section of the novel, "Cherry," which depicts the protagonist's war experience with harrowing detail and humility. Walker doesn't shy away from humanizing his protagonist with feelings of frustration and fragility. The protagonist states that

"People kept dying: in ones and twos, no heroes, no battles. Nothing. We were just the help, glorified scarecrows; just there to look busy, up the road and down the road, expensive as fuck, dumber than shit" (175). This sentiment is symbolized later in the "snuff films" made by two soldiers who "lived in a room across the way" from the protagonist. The two soldiers would film themselves killing mice: "in . . . their masterpiece, they crucified a mouse on Popsicle sticks and disemboweled the crucified mouse while it was on the cross" (177-178). The soldiers are presented as being part of a larger snuff film directed by a war-hungry society that only becomes disturbing when one experiences it firsthand, or watches intently without looking away. In combat, his feelings of inadequacy and inability to assimilate bleed off the page. He describes feeling "embarrassed" and "stupid" after telling a wounded soldier, "I got you" when carrying him on a litter to a medivac site, stating it was a "melodramatic thing to have said" (103). When faced with the task of resuscitating a mortally wounded haji, he states:

I should have packed the haji full of gauze. I should have kept packing the wound till I couldn't pack it anymore, till it was packed tight. But I didn't. I should have had him lie on the side he was wounded on. But I forgot. I said I was going to prop the haji's feet up on my helmet because the haji could go into shock if his feet weren't propped up like that. And even though this was true I was only saying it just to say things because there was no exit wound and I didn't know what to do . . . I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock. . . I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing something right. (141-142)

After returning from Iraq, Emily and the protagonist get divorced, again like many of my battle buddies, but they stay together, depending on each other for survival and to support their

addictions. The protagonist states, "There was nothing better than to be young and on heroin . . . You could kill yourself real slow and feel like a million dollars" (230).

When many novels unravel in simple, short dénouements, Walker's *Cherry* winds down like an addict detoxing cold turkey, denoting the truth of people battling emotions and addiction. Walker's greatest images emerge in the short final three sections of *Cherry*, "Hummingbird," "The Great Dope Fiend Romance," and "A Comedown." In a tense scene between the protagonist and Emily, Walker delivers:

She got to screaming at me then. She'd scream like a great bird sometimes. She'd grow wings and fly around the house screaming like that. She'd be up around the ceiling, screaming. It was really awful. It was like arguing with a pterodactyl. You could do nothing. (245)

From the vivid imagery of Emily growing wings, to the absurd abstraction of arguing with a pterodactyl, the image comes to life, and the bursts of his thoughts at the end show the humanness of the narrator attempting to make sense out of madness. The repetition of the word "scream" echoes the action taking place within the scene, the ceaseless cacophonous scream of Emily, of a gigantic bird, of a pterodactyl.

The protagonist starts robbing banks to fund their addiction and is surprised by how easy it is. He justifies his work because it is not only for him but for Emily. Their love for each other is only matched by their desire for another hit. However, the prologue at the beginning of the book lets you know from the beginning that things don't work out.

Walker writes with intentionality; however, there are details that draw attention to themselves and reveal the fictitious nature of his otherwise clean prose, especially if you are an army veteran. There are details that almost come off as inside jokes, such as one of the wives

back home sleeping with “a guy named Dale” (178) and spending all of the soldier’s money. In the Army, Chip and Dale are the generic names for male strippers. Another detail that may fly under the radar, that “unless you happen to have been there, you’ve never heard of” (102), is when the protagonist sticks himself in the thumb with a morphine auto-injector, stating, “I was holding the fucking thing backwards and the needle shot through my thumb and came out my thumbnail, spraying morphine on the ground” (132). Oftentimes, one of the medics or the Nuclear Biological Chemical (NBC) officers would demonstrate the use of an auto-injector and fire one through a piece of cardboard or something else and shoot morphine or another drug like a fountain into the sky, and state that this is why you don’t hold one backwards. The scene within *Cherry* makes an attempt at comic relief, as well as solidifies the protagonist’s portrayal of himself as the imperfect soldier, fallible and flawed. It is also an attempt at getting the reader to feel for the protagonist, because not only did he inflict pain on himself, “a number of people had seen this happen” (132). What further makes this detail stand out is the lack of implications resulting from the inflicted wound. We never hear of him going to the aid station like he had before; he doesn’t even mention caring for his own wound. There is no mention of physical pain, not at the moment of injection, or after. No difficulty in keeping the wound clean in an environment of sand. Walker asserts, with the absence of details, that other than embarrassment, the protagonist faced no real ramifications worth mentioning for shooting a “15mm auto injector” through his thumb.

After returning from deployment, the protagonist pops off at a bar and ends up outnumbered. Luckily the girl he happens to be with has some friends at the bar, and if you’ve seen a movie recently, you can picture what her friends looked like: “Two black guys. Gay ones. Two gay black guys in fur coats and diamond earrings. One of them a giant” (211). The scene is

almost too cliché to believe, yet, at the same time, because the trope is so frequent, it becomes believable, because whom else would one expect.

As veterans pick up on the subtle details, literary scholars are sure to debate Walker's depiction of women in *Cherry*. The protagonist says of himself, "some girls I didn't deserve. Some girls I deserved. One thing: I was always an asshole" (201). Nearly every "girl" within *Cherry* performs a sexual action with the protagonist; those who don't, attempt to, or are tagalongs to the girls who do. Only one female soldier stands out, one of the warrior medics, who is depicted as a girl sitting on the stairs crying as she talks to her mom about getting sent to Walter Reed as a duty station. She pleads for understanding from her mother: "'But, Mom . . . I'm a WARRIOR Medic'" (80). Being stationed at Walter Reed would nearly guarantee no direct combat exposure. The "girl" on the stairs serves to juxtapose the protagonist's reality that he will inevitably be going almost directly to combat despite his request to be stationed elsewhere, to include Walter Reed. The "girl" on the stairs is portrayed as brave, craving to be deployed, but also within the context of the novel weak because she has conformed to the self-image of warrior medic, which the protagonist vehemently opposes, stating, "the training battalion had a mantra: Warrior Medic. Naturally everyone thought it was stupid. Yet the cadre were supposed to call us Warrior Medics. So it was like that" (66). During basic training, the protagonist mentions that some of the female recruits slept with the Drill Sergeants in turn for special favors, which is nearly always rumored and speculated in training units involving both sexes, to the point that not including this detail would almost inherently draw attention to itself.

However, throughout the novel, the protagonist reserves making judgment against any of the women, aside from his ex-girlfriend Madison who cheats on him. The protagonist doesn't hold back on his feelings about her as he vents to Emily. Although the relationship occurs before

the protagonist's time in service, Madison represents the archetypal image of all cheating girlfriends, fiancés, and spouses of the military, and the protagonist doesn't withhold any profanity in the description of her or her action.

With *Cherry*, Walker sheds light on issues with VA health care and veteran suicide. The protagonist attempts to reach out for help but never stays with any meaningful therapy options, whether VA or civilian. He leaves messages with the VA (261), talks with a psychologist, but ends up missing appointments because he is unable to find the office (220). He attempts to see a civilian doctor who says the war was already over when the protagonist had served in Iraq (263). He considers becoming an inpatient at a psychiatric facility, but backs out, stating "that'd be bad," (201) so he just leaves. He asks one of his girlfriends to kill him (221), and she attempts to choke him but he throws her off, yet laments, "It would have been better had she put pressure on my carotid arteries. Then I'd have been out in a few seconds and she could have done what needed to be done. But the trachea hurt too much" (221). The most powerful statement Walker makes with his debut novel is without words, and that is the need for better substance abuse treatment options and criminal justice reform. At the time this novel was written, Nico Walker was serving a prison sentence, and as of 2018 is still serving.

***Eisenhower's Guerrillas: The Jedburghs, the Maquis, and the Liberation of France.* Benjamin F. Jones. Oxford University Press, 2016. \$31.95, 417 pp.**

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In his famous work, Carl von Clausewitz wrote that “a general insurrection” should be viewed “simply as another means of war” (Book 6: Chapter 26). Despite this admonishment, military historians and military professionals alike have all too-often divided the study of warfare into a conventional-irregular dichotomy that human experience does not justify. While we might agree with the Prussian military theorist that these two forms of war-making are often composed of somewhat different characteristics, we should acknowledge that they often go hand-in-hand. Nearly all of the wars we commonly think of as “conventional” actually had substantial irregular components. Napoleon had his Austerlitz and his Jena, but also his *guerrilla* in Spain and partisans in Russia; the Great War, not only its Western and Eastern Fronts, but also its Lawrence in Arabia and its Lettow-Vorbeck in Africa.

In this excellent study of another campaign all-to-often simplified into its conventional elements, Ben Jones has reminded us of the importance, and the complexity, of Eisenhower’s plans to use guerrilla warriors in support of the liberation of France. Much more than merely a chronicle of the planning and employment of these irregular forces in support of a conventional campaign, Jones has provided readers with an analysis of the political goals, the military strategy, and especially, the disconnect between the two that Eisenhower had to wrestle with. According to Jones, Eisenhower wanted to make a maximum use of an estimated 100,000 French resistance fighters in his campaign to destroy or drive out the German forces occupying

France (these guerrillas, and especially those in rural areas of France, were often referred to as the *Maquis*). While Eisenhower was eager to work closely with Charles de Gaulle and his *Comité Français de la Liberation Nationale* (CFLN) in order to integrate the French irregulars into his plans and operations, his political superiors—especially FDR, and Churchill too, at least initially—would not authorize him to do so because they did not recognize de Gaulle as the rightful ultimate political authority of France. This created a terrible problem for Eisenhower after the various French resistance groups formed the *Conseil National de la Resistance* (CNR) in May 1943 and pledged its loyalty to de Gaulle.

To make matters worse, the political and military conflict between the Allied powers and the Free French included important differences in the general understanding of the campaign and in their specific objectives. Allied political leaders, and perhaps some military commanders too, saw France primarily as terrain to be conquered en route to an ultimate obliteration of the NAZI state and its war machine. The Free French leaders saw France as a homeland to be liberated from German occupation, immediately re-governed by Frenchmen, and quickly purged of its collaborators. These important distinctions played havoc with Eisenhower's efforts to maximize the potential forces at his disposal and coordinate their activities. Jones' analysis of this complex multinational political-military context will be of significant value to anyone seeking to understand modern warfare and ways allied nations cooperate, or fail to do so, while fighting a common enemy.

Eisenhower's Guerrillas is also the story of the use of guerrilla warriors in combination with a conventional campaign. After briefly discussing the history of guerrilla warfare, especially in the modern era, Jones describes the birth of those organizations that would be responsible for waging irregular warfare in France—such as the British Special Operations Executive, the

American Office of Strategic Services, and the French resistance. This story begins with the defeat of France in 1940, and the British preparations for waging partisan war in England.

Remember Churchill's speech of 4 June 1940:

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, *we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender*, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

Thankfully, it never came to that in Britain, but it had come to that—at least for many—in France. While Pétain and others were willing to surrender, many others were not. And the very threat of an invasion of Britain, when coupled with Churchill's commitment to invincibility, led to new organizations and much thinking about how to use irregular forces not only in the defense of Britain, but in future campaigns elsewhere, to include the invasion of northwest Europe and the liberation of France. Hence, the British SOE was involved with the planning for that invasion for many months prior to D-Day. They soon were joined by representatives of the American OSS, which was also looking for ways to use its unconventional operators in support of a major

conventional operation that was commanded by a conventional theater commander. Overlord was that operation, and Eisenhower was that commander.

One of the primary ways Eisenhower, the SOE, and the OSS (the latter two working together at Special Forces Headquarters within Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces, or SHAEF), sought to employ these irregulars was as three-man, multinational "Jedburgh" teams that would drop into France and attempt to supply, coordinate, and when necessary, lead local French resistance groups, integrating them into the Allied plan to defeat the German occupation forces. Eventually, more than ninety of these Jedburgh teams deployed to France, though, due to the political differences with de Gaulle, only one team went in before D-Day. The rest entered over the next four months, and their success in supplying, coordinating, leading, and integrating the *Maquis* into Eisenhower's plans varied widely. Generally, despite their efforts, their mission represented a missed opportunity for the Allied military command, which was not prepared for the French uprising that occurred in the summer of 1944. In the end, the Free French achieved both their military *and* their political objectives (not by themselves, to be sure), while the Allied governments only achieved their military goals, and even those were achieved in a less optimal fashion than might have been the case had FDR allowed Eisenhower to cooperate earlier and more completely with de Gaulle and his forces before D-Day.

Throughout this engaging study, Jones acknowledges the serious issues inherent in planning and conducting unconventional operations, such as controlling the local irregulars, dealing with the hostile occupier's reactions (e.g., German reprisals), and getting conventionally-minded commanders to commit scarce resources to the irregular campaign. Vichy leaders shrunk from these opportunities and risks in 1940, but others (such as de Gaulle) decided to make the most of them.

Based on impressive archival research in France, Britain, and the United States, *Eisenhower's Guerrillas* is an important book on a subject crucial to all scholars and military professionals that seek to understand modern war in all its complexity.

***The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force.* Eliot A. Cohen. Basic Books, 2018.**

\$27.00, 304 pp.

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In 1901 Vice President Theodore Roosevelt famously announced that “whether we wish it or not, we cannot avoid hereafter having duties to do in the face of other nations. All that we can do is to settle whether we shall perform these duties well or ill...Speak softly and carry a big stick—you will go far” (ix). In *The Big Stick*, Eliot A. Cohen addresses the importance of hard power on the international stage. Cohen breaks his argument down into three components: “whether [the] expense of blood and treasure” of recent conflicts “was worth it,” a discussion of “the American hand—the mix of human, technological, and economic resources that the United States can bring to bear on international security,” and “the four main challenges to which military power is a necessary if partial component of the response” (xiii). Cohen adopts an investigative tone, relying heavily on concrete facts and logically sound arguments to prove that military power is indeed an integral part of maintaining international stability and domestic peace.

The Big Stick first addresses the question of why American military force is necessary “for any purpose other than self-defense and the pursuit of national interests as narrowly defined” (6). Acknowledging a number of schools of thought that oppose the use of hard power, such as one which believes in the “better angels of our nature,” Cohen argues that soft power is sufficient to settle international disputes (23). However, he addresses each school of thought with a well-developed counterargument. He argues that “soft power is not necessarily gentle,”

that it can “deprive [a] country of medical supplies, clean water, and electricity” (19). Cohen’s ability to succinctly address each argument against hard power establishes the absolute necessity of military force. Additionally, Cohen addresses the question of why the United States bears the burden of maintaining global order. He suggests that international involvement serves as an indirect form of self-defense and that “a conflict-torn world will drag the United States into its quarrels” (26). Beyond acting in self-interest, however, the United States has an obligation to contribute to international stability because of its capabilities.

Discussing the United States’ position in the global world order, the text provides concrete evidence to support the argument that the country remains “the world’s leading military power” (90). By providing statistics on defense expenditures, nuclear forces, and personnel/equipment to prove the dominance of the American military, Cohen argues that the United States military is “large, experienced, well-equipped, and well-led and trained,” and that “it has behind it the best demographics of any developed country, a huge and powerful economy, and a far stronger political system than that of Russia or China” (96). Interestingly, he argues that its primary weakness is the poor strategic education of military officials, suggesting that officers view strategic education as simply another checkbox on the path to increased rank and responsibility (84). Combined with this concern and the recent surge in military support by the governments in countries such as China and Russia, Cohen believes that the gap in military power between the United States and other world powers has the potential to shrink further in coming years.

In light of the increasing power and influence of other countries and the growing equalization of the United States and other actors on the world stage, China is highlighted as the primary security threat to the United States. Throughout the book, Cohen argues that

Chinese power has been grossly underestimated. He contends that the greatest concern involves Chinese claims in the South China Sea "that would not only deny other countries access to the riches of the seabed, but would, by constraining commerce, render them vassals to their giant neighbor" (110). In proving the gravity of the situation, Cohen suggests some of the events that could trigger serious conflict between the two nations, including further claims of man-made islands in the South China Sea (122). Beyond discussing the potential challenges, Cohen provides potential American responses, establishing his credibility and displaying thorough consideration of the discussed issues. He argues that "the key to American strategy in the Asia Pacific region is a powerful navy and air force that can reassure, strengthen, and protect its allies, and cripple China by blockading its ports and disrupting its commerce" (120). He applies the same problem-solution structure to the remaining chapters concerning the challenges faced by the military.

While Cohen believes that China is "the great geopolitical challenger to the United States," he argues that "the jihadists are, by their murderous convictions and practices, the most immediate threat" (149). He discusses the difficulties associated with combating the unconventional warfare of Islamic terrorists, such as the "tacticization of strategy" (137). In focusing heavily on the targeted killing of leaders, the United States reduces the war on terrorism to "a matter of mere tactics" (137). The country must acknowledge the conflict as a true war and employ "political warfare" and other strategies accordingly, while accepting the possible need "to secure and stabilize countries won back from, or on the verge of succumbing to, jihadi movements" (145-146). Again, Cohen applies clear facts and statistics to identify and determine potential hard power solutions to the threats faced by the United States.

Further emphasizing China's growing global influence, *The Big Stick* recognizes a similar need to take the "dangerous states" of Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan seriously. To exemplify this concern, Cohen suggests that China interacts with such states "through oil and military technology deals with Russia, large infrastructure and arms projects with Pakistan, a warming relationship with Iran, and the long-standing patron-client relationship with an admittedly troublesome North Korea" (172). He also emphasizes the importance of addressing conflict in the periphery. He closes *The Big Stick* with a discussion of the difficulties faced in ungoverned space, including "territorial, maritime, space, and cyber" domains (192). He relates the above challenges by discussing the importance of ungoverned space, claiming for example that the United States "has to pursue cyberwarfare against jihadi propaganda, disabling e-mail accounts and even sabotaging servers" (193). He argues that although "no state commands" these domains, "chaos would threaten U.S. interests" (193). Cohen's discussion of ungoverned space as spanning every facet of national security proves the significance of the challenges posed in these domains.

Providing a plethora of well-situated facts and evidence to support his plea for the necessity of military force, Cohen adopts a rational and straightforward approach in *The Big Stick*. Cohen explains the challenges faced by the United States which require the use of military force. In order to maximize effectiveness, military professionals must understand these challenges. They must understand when and how military force should be applied; however, they must also acknowledge when other means of power are best capable of achieving national goals. As argued by Clausewitz, war is a mere "continuation of politics by other means" and must be accepted as such (202). When American and non-combatant lives can be spared, all action should be taken to do so.