

Book Reviews

***The Mysteries of Haditha: A Memoir.* M.C. Armstrong. University of Nebraska Press, 2020, \$27.95, hardcover, 167 pp.**

Reviewed by MaxieJane Frazier

Senior Military Faculty (retired), United States Air Force Academy

Memoir can be the perfect literary form to develop understanding of larger world events. In M.C. Armstrong's *The Mysteries of Haditha*, we watch a young man form a relationship with a small portion of a foreign country and the larger implications of the U.S. involvement there and throughout the Middle East. This journey, both physical and narrative, becomes informed by a simple question: "Who's their good guy?" (112).

Armstrong takes readers on an adventure to Iraq where his past and present collide, leading him to better understand a younger version of himself and a spectrum of national politics in a different light. He begins with the lark of an idea that he could embed as a journalist in his high school buddy's special forces unit in Iraq, and he earns a sobered understanding about adult concerns gained from firsthand experience. Even more compelling, Armstrong proves that "boots on the ground" was only the first step in developing a context for understanding his trip. By the end he can say that the entire journey becomes "about more than foreign policy" (165) as he lists the ways that pervasive American faults and shortcomings add up to a mindset ready to repeat history if we're not careful.

When Armstrong begins with the catching line "I met a woman on my way to Iraq," he sets readers up for a few expectations. We see him as a guy's guy who can meet a woman anywhere, and a person who is on his way to war. The opening of this book demonstrates the way that the Matt Armstrong of 2008 was busy bullshitting his way through his existence, a "fake it 'til you make it" attitude that put him on an airplane to Baghdad, dodging a savvy journalist's questions which unpeel the layers of ignorance shrouding Armstrong in his single-mindedness just to experience Iraq through his connection with his high school friend. By the second page, we know he is part of a magazine created for the trip, ignorant of the very close connections between his work at North Carolina A&T and the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks on America, unaware of who the mastermind of the attacks was, and swiftly coming to the conclusion "I might be in way over my head" (2). His escape from this embarrassment leads him to the latrine where he relates a side narrative of American military graffiti observed during his time "overseas," beginning with "*Chuck Norris's tears cure cancer. Too bad he never cries*" (3). In only three pages Armstrong manages to show bravado, deep unawareness, and a beginning of the understanding that propels him to become the person who writes this memoir.

Once he has established his absolute unsuitability for his task embedding with his hometown friend's unit in Iraq, Armstrong moves his memoir into a braid of chapters beginning six months before his embed and chapters describing his March 2008 experiences. By the final chapter, he catches up, landing back in America and beginning what is arguably the more important journey where he labors to make sense of his experiences. The form allows readers an opportunity to grow close to Matt Armstrong, the man struggling in relationships and worried about ill family members while beginning a new teaching career and seeking new experiences. Not everyone will like him

as he describes moments when he remains petulant in an argument or turns to porn out of boredom, but I would argue that everyone can respect his unflinching honesty about his shortcomings. Written in clear, elegant prose with brilliant connections between his personal perspective and the global nature of his short experience in Iraq, we are left to recognize his vast insight and intelligence on our own.

But, wait: can porn and elegant prose be in the same paragraph? This juxtaposition of an earthy, physical human with a thoughtful, erudite scholar is perhaps the best part of this book. On one occasion, Armstrong goes on a mission to visit seven "named areas of interest" during his embed, the most dangerous part of his entire tour. When he gains the nerve to step out of the Humvee and join the soldiers who have already cleared a site, he writes that he felt like "the final veil had been removed. Yes, I was finally a man," (90). That sense of having actually have gone to war only comes when he leaves the compound and leaves the safety of the vehicle. Citing a list of academic arguments against being "outside," he writes for us to join him and "feel the awe of the rube snorting his cocaine of war sand, his nitrous of war wind, all that secondhand smoke that seems to have about it a virginal perfume. God, I cannot emphasize enough how delusional and intoxicated I felt in that moment. (91). The physicality of his urge to bounce around the powdery sand like an astronaut just landed on the moon keeps us with his being. Yet he keeps us grounded because they do not find any weapons or suspicious people. In the final location reached after dark, we join him by the light of a Coleman lantern in a mud brick home of some fishermen. He notes in his journal that the father doesn't want his children to "*get hooked on fishing' wants them to get degrees, but there aren't any jobs. Has a rod, a shotgun, clothes on hooks, food on a wooden window shelf, cooler of water, and a single iron bed strewn with clothes and blankets*"

(100). In the most real sense, these are people with the hopes, ambitions, and concerns that all of us have.

His struggle between glimpsing the personal, the human in the Iraqis he comes to meet and addressing his preconceived notion of what war reporting looks like informs his entire endeavor. Armstrong reveals his intense desire to be "in the know" and operate with ease in the war environment, wishing to drop the name "Patreus" and discuss the Haditha massacre, but he writes "my anxious, slow-witted, rookie disposition couldn't summon the killer rejoinder" (84). These comments about his ineptitude help us realize that Armstrong just needs time to think. If he could lay out the concepts at work in Haditha and order them so that they make sense, then he could come up with something. This memoir is that something, and the mysteries mentioned in the title are one of the best parts.

Witnessing Armstrong pack his experience into his head that was already full of literature gives readers access to his literary influences: Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Thomas Wolfe, T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Billy Collins, Brian Turner's *Here Bullet*, and others who shaped his expectations as well as his understanding. Notably absent are some of the most foundational contemporary war material such as journalist Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, former soldier Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army*. Armstrong's literary background shows in the strength of his writing. His narrative of being despoiled by his brief time in Iraq remains the more compelling for the unique perspective uninformed by the traditional military literature that remains focused on the very preconceived notions Armstrong faces throughout the memoir.

Despite Armstrong's deprecation, we come to trust what he has to say, partially because he says it so well. The moment when he describes his trans-Atlantic flight toward the war zone as over "the dark leathery crawl of the Atlantic Ocean at night," (125) we're transported to the high-pitched whine of a long aircraft ride, the singular circle of light illuminating his cram session of reading recent articles about assassinations in Al Anbar Province where he would be embedding. By the time we hear the story of an "unmonitored" (138) conversation with a contractor while Armstrong is on his way out of the theater of operations, we trust him to accurately observe and narrate his experiences. When that conversation reveals mysteries at the Haditha Dam Armstrong just left behind, we watch the contractor grow agitated: "his face grew red and [. . .] he seemed to be playing bloody knuckles with himself as he started to remember his time in Haditha," (138). In the end, this conversation was among the most important in propelling Armstrong onto his path to self-discovery and investigation.

The Mysteries of Haditha is a memoir that lets us hang out with the everyday life at a U.S. base in Iraq with video games and movies and missions as well as in the personal life of Matt Armstrong sorting out what kind of son, scholar, and man he wants to be. Along the way, he offers us some big ideas and big truths that should leave us with a sense of responsibility for our own country's actions.

By the end of the book, Armstrong starts pulling the strands of his braided narrative tight. He moves past his time in Iraq into his time of discovery, describing his conflicted emotions with giving time to the words of people long perceived as enemies of America, countering these

emotions with, "But I also felt like I wanted to know more, and as a student of history and a son trying to be faithful to his father's advice, I *needed* to know more" (152). In the end, he shows us that everything is braided. He writes about our nation's actions and the reverberating effects that become almost an echo chamber until we don't know which is an action and which is a reaction. The results can't be untangled from each other. Armstrong leaves us with his evidence and his mysteries and the ways that the inextricable answers are not as important as the need for us to realize that all of it is conducted by human beings: the wars, the torture, the wounded and killed soldiers, all of it is real.

***Glorious Boy*. Aimee Liu. Red Hen, 2020. \$18.95, 344 pp.**

Reviewed by Deborah Jones

Executive Producer (2006-2010), *Search for Common Ground*

Until March 1942 the war raging in the Pacific remained a distant, if uneasy, rumor among the residents of Port Blair, a British-built penal colony in the Andaman archipelago, between Burma and India in the Bay of Bengal. *Glorious Boy*, by Aimee Liu, begins there on March 13, as the British are faced with a Japanese invasion that nobody thought could happen.

My personal interest in this novel stems from my work as a peace builder for the international NGO, Search for Common Ground. For over a decade, across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, I co-implemented peace-building media projects with local artists, technicians and writers who experienced protracted deadly conflict, often across ethnic or tribal lines. In spite of historic precedence, no one can foresee one's country dissolving into chaos or neighbors taking arms against one another. Without taking sides, or placing blame, Liu dramatizes in *Glorious Boy* exactly how this can happen overnight and in the least likely of places.

Claire Durant, an up-and-coming American ethnologist, and her husband Shep, a British civil surgeon, hurriedly pack research gathered over five years in a rush to make one of the last ships leaving for the mainland. Boarding ends at two. No exceptions and no locals allowed. And that's a problem for Claire and Shep because their four-year-old son, Ty, and Naila, his thirteen-year-old *ayah*, are so deeply bonded that she is the only person with whom the boy willingly communicates.

In the chaos of packing the house, Claire suggests that Ty and Naila play outside. Just for ten minutes. When Claire is ready to depart, Ty is nowhere to be found and in her desperate search, she realizes Naila and Ty are hiding and she cannot find them.

Her husband has been waiting impatiently for Claire and Ty at the dock. "Shep spots the large red knob of the Morris winding down the hill... Claire jumps out and pushes ahead on foot. Her spasmodic haste and rudeness---telegraphs her desperation... And why is she *alone*?" (20)

The story shifts to Naila's point of view. Only the night before Claire told her, "We're not leaving you here. As soon as we get to Calcutta, we'll apply... to bring you and Leyo over on the next ship." (110). Not leaving her behind but not taking her along either. That means she and Ty will be separated, and that is unbearable.

On that fateful morning, and because *Memsahib* told her to go outside, Naila and Ty scramble down the trails to nestle in the hollow of a Banyan tree. It is their secret place, too far from the house to hear anyone call for them, and where the soppy jungle heat lulls them to sleep. When Naila awakens, it is late in the day. She asks herself how much time has passed. Her thoughts move to the ship. "She didn't intend to fall asleep herself. What *did* she intend?" (111)

Of course, the actions and the choices made by all involved have consequences that are felt immediately. Shep forces Claire onto the boat, while he stays behind, determined to find Ty and Naila. He does so, but soon thereafter, they learn there will not be a second rescue boat. The family is splintered, and the Japanese are landing any moment. The British left behind will not be spared. How this family fights to reunite, in spite of staggering odds, is the dramatic push of this multi-layered novel.

Liu moves the story between the pivotal day in 1942 to earlier points in the lives of Claire, Shep, Ty and Naila, firmly grounding the reader in the back story of the main characters.

Moreover, she effectively threads the main story with character-driven subplots that expose the complexities of a multi-cultural, colonial society that had developed in Port Blair by the thirties. And it is her ethnically diverse cast of characters and their inevitable clashes between one another, the British, and the indigenous tribes that is critical to understanding the depth of the book's themes.

Between 1858 and 1939, the British government in India was gradually losing its grip on its colonies. To deal with the rising unrest, the government deported 83,000 Indian and Burmese or Mapalah freedom fighters (rebels) to the infamous Cellular Jail in Port Blair, making it the largest penal colony in the British Empire. (Anderson, 2018).

How to run the place became a significant problem for the British administrators. They decided to entice Anglo-Indians (Eurasians) and mainland prisoners of many ethnicities to voluntarily relocate to Port Blair. (Anderson, 2018). There was the hard work of supplying and running a prison, and the administrators needed warm bodies.

Thus, by the time the fictional Claire and Shep Durant arrive in Port Blair, they would likely engage with Karens brought from Burma to work the timber trade, Bengalis, Tamils, Telegua and possibly Bhanu *dacoits* from Upper Pradesh brought over by the Salvation Army. (Anderson, 2018).

Inevitably, over generations, the ethnic groups intermarried. Their offspring – like Naila – became known as 'local born.' Attitudes of the local born toward the indigenous tribes – the Biya or Jarawa people of the forest --- were as us/them in their orientation as was the attitude of the British rulers towards all people of color. Naila refers to the Biya as "the naked people." She tells Claire that "everyone in Port Blair – Europeans and local alike---viewed the naked people as pests because they were strange and dirty and ugly to see, uncivilized... Teacher Sen said the

surviving forest people still raided settlements and plantations up north, and some of the most remote islands had tribes that were said to be cannibals.” (39)

A newly minted ethnographer inspired by Margaret Mead, Claire is determined to study these forest people – the Biya. Fortunately, Leyo, a local employee, is Biya and offers to tutor her in his language, a task far more difficult than she imagined:

The only one left who spoke pure Biya was his headman, Kuli, who lived with the rest of his clan in the forest to the north. The second challenge was the Biya’s entirely separate nonverbal language. To explain, Leyo gestured with his palm to his crown, then his chest, ‘Spirit talk is for head, for heart; silent, still we hear.’ Among the Biya people, if Claire understood him correctly, this silent spirit talk was valued more than the language of words. The language of the spirit was communal and empathic. (41)

And yet, another realization: “The unspoken language wasn’t silent at all, she thought. It must be positively cacophonous, once you learned to hear it.” (44) Claire has an insight about herself that guides her through the challenges she faces through the course of the novel. She realizes spoken words have their limits when she admits, “I am deaf and dumb.” (44.) And then, she becomes determined to *hear* what is unspoken.

Easier said than done for an American woman. It is Claire’s journey into uncharted territory, both physically and emotionally, that propels the narrative. We walk with her as she becomes aware that to “study” people is to treat them like objects under a microscope. Even so, the Biya might have remained at arm’s length. However, unspoken language becomes intensely

personal when her son, Ty, reaches the age at which normal children should be speaking *words*. Because he is not, Claire blames herself. And then there is Naila, who communicates beautifully, and nonverbally, with the boy. When Claire is relegated to third wheel in their threesome, she fights urges of jealousy and guilt. How can she blame Naila who is an orphan and still a child? And yet, this girl runs away with her boy.

As the story tracks Claire, Shep, Naila and Ty from town to bush, the scenes are detailed and beautifully descriptive of the indigenous people and their lush island forest. Liu respects the Biya too much to romanticize the bush, and there are no "noble savages." Life is tough and brutal and not for the faint of heart.

After waiting weeks for word of Shep and Ty, Claire has to engineer a way to get them back. The determination to find her missing family sends her on an unrelenting, dangerous march into the heart of war, as well as the depths of the forest. Out of her element, she has to steel herself for the rigors of the journey but at the same time to open herself up to the idea of *attunement*. She must listen to all sides: to those from varying ethnic backgrounds, those with opposing agendas, to nature in all its splendor and brutality, and to her own son -- with different ears.

In this well-paced and compelling historical novel, each character does his or her best to get by under circumstances that are so life-threatening they would cripple most of us. The choices made are not always good. The characters are flawed, and that makes them very human.

When I was working at Search for Common Ground, I did not share culture, ethnicity, religion or language with most of my colleagues. One of the many things I learned was that in order to find common ground, one must listen to one another "with different ears." It is only when we learn to attune to others that it becomes possible to recognize one another's common

humanity---a tall order for people taught to hate each other. Most of the people with whom I worked wanted desperately to find a way to co-exist. Even with such a strong desire to reach across dividing lines, it is a challenge, for most of us, that will last a lifetime.

Liu gives voice to this same struggle through the character of the Dutch Captain van Dulm who has arrived to help Claire and her co-conspirators search for Claire's missing family. He says, "The most difficult thing to remember is that the enemy is human, but this is also the most important... I must remind myself constantly... Especially when I find myself being my own worst enemy."

"Does that happen often?" Claire asks. Van Dulm replies, "It is a daily conversation."

This novel resonates today and will stand the test of time alongside the work of Graham Greene and Michael Ondaatje.

***The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire: War, Remembrance, and an American Tragedy.* Steven Trout.**

University Press of Kansas, 2020. \$19.95, 239 pp.

Reviewed by Diana H. Polley
United States Air Force Academy

In his introduction to *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire*, Steven Trout describes the book as a “blend of biography, history, and memory” (5). This description does not do the interdisciplinarity of the book justice. *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire* fuses multiple genres—biography and family, war and purpose, history and nation, psychology and trauma, architecture and nature, government and bureaucracy, and finally language and letters; it does so in order to tell the narrative, both of the life and tragic death of David Westphall in the Vietnam War and the lifelong effort of the Westphalls to build and maintain what Trout calls a “colossal remembrance project” (19). On the one hand, Trout’s book focuses on the wounds of one suffering family and the stunning architectural memorial that was built in their son’s honor. The subtitle of the text, “War, Remembrance, and an American Tragedy,” however, underscores the larger project at stake here. *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire* provides the reader with a comprehensive picture of the American experience of war—the complex variables that draw us to serve, the immensity of war (from the mundane daily details to the unbearable suffering and loss of life), the vast web of despair for those left behind, the monuments built to honor the fallen, and the decisive shift that war causes in the national consciousness. Trout’s book, therefore, addresses a very specific Vietnam War story but also acts as a synecdochal representation of war as “American tragedy.”

In addition to a brief Introduction and Epilogue, the book is divided into five main chapters, which together chronicle, as Trout says in the Introduction, “a story of annihilating grief and frenetic creation, followed by the sorts of unexpected twists and turns that so often make up the anything-but-static lives of public memorials” (5). Trout’s story begins with the father of David Westphall, Victor Walter Westphall II. In chapter one, aptly titled “Father and Son,” Trout briefly relates Victor’s early twentieth-century biography, which reads like the American dream: one man’s rise, from his young childhood on a Montana homestead to a life of relative comfort and prosperity as a developer, husband, and father of two sons in New Mexico. The second half of the chapter centers on Victor and Jeanne Westphall’s first son, David, specifically his childhood and life leading up to his enlistment in the Vietnam War. The chapter, however, is not simply concerned with Victor’s rags to riches story or with David’s biography and more with several key psychosocial factors: how Victor’s own service in the US Navy during WWII would affect both father’s and son’s shifting visions of war and shape their lives; how Victor’s emphasis on physical prowess and athletic achievement would have psychological consequences for David; and how other key areas of David’s life—his intellectual development and his relationship with women, for example—would influence him to re-enlist in the Marine Corps in 1966 and enter the Vietnam War.

Chapter two, “A Casualty of Vietnam,” merges the historical and strategic military details that surround David’s experience in Vietnam with a close literary analysis of sections taken from the thirty letters David wrote to his family while overseas. While the chapter focuses on an objective historical account of the War, there exists an underlying painful prescience, particularly rendered in the selection and analysis of David’s letters, as when one month before his death he writes home “my spirits remain high” (71). Trout’s expertise as a literary scholar provides the

book, and this chapter in particular, a unique glance at life in the War; seemingly mundane details in David's letters that might otherwise be left out or left untouched here are highlighted, such as the Marine's wish list home: his request for gun cleaning solvent (seemingly not adequately provided by the US) or a small calendar (indicative of that psychological desire to retain time and structure in war). It is David's petition for a large map of Vietnam from *National Geographic*, however, that sticks with the reader; as Trout explains: "Military maps... gave absolutely no sense of his location in relation to the country as a whole... His place in Vietnam now made a little more sense—at least geographically" (74). It is this type of detail, which integrates biography, history, and literary analysis, that gives the reader a rare glimpse of the chaos and confusion—the fog of war—from David Westphall's perspective. Chapter two ends with David's own chaotic and violent death in Vietnam, on May 22, 1968, recounted seemingly from those few in his Bravo Company who managed to survive that day's disastrous attack on the NVA.

From chapter three on, the book begins to blend biography—the immediate and grievous effect David's death would have on the Westphall family—with a study of architecture and memorial as well as the effects war has on the national consciousness (from the individual to the political and bureaucratic). Chapter three describes the family's resolve to build the ethereal white monument, what would eventually be the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire, both to memorialize David and to "express the hope for universal peace" (95). The chapter also reviews the various choices that the family made regarding the memorial's architectural plan and build, from the design decisions to the cost and structural challenges. One of the more poignant sections in this chapter is Trout's coverage of the irreversible effect David's death had on the mental health of his mother, Jeanne Westphall, and ultimately her marriage to Victor.

Although brief, the section provides a visceral account of the psychological trauma inflicted by the Vietnam War on those left behind. One wishes that Jeanne Westphall did not fade away so completely from the book after this section.

The final two chapters of the book navigate the shifting objectives and significance of the memorial and Victor Westphall's attempt to find for it a perpetual benefactor. Here, Trout adroitly addresses the distinctive circumstances of this particular war memorial. Whereas America's war memorials are generally created postbellum and established with federal dollars and a clear patriotic purpose, by contrast the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Angel Fire has referenced, at different times, a multiplicity of simultaneous objectives: at once a memorial to a lost son, a memorial to all fallen soldiers (American or otherwise), and a monument to peace. Trout summarizes this collective, when he features David Westphall as "a Christ figure within the chapel's implied narrative. Like the story of Christ's crucifixion, the memory of David's sacrifice will, the chapel asserts, lead to collective redemption by the ending of the sin of war" (128). This implied narrative of the Memorial would, of course, make it more difficult to find it a permanent financial and administrative home, particularly after the completion of Maya Lin's federally sanctioned Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C in 1982. Thus, in addition to developing critical storylines, these chapters emphasize the multiple significance and layered meaning of memorials—the importance of why, where, how, and for whom they are constructed.

The Epilogue draws together story lines but serves as more than merely a conclusion. Most importantly, it describes one of the most crucial moments in the text: Victor and his younger son Walter's trip, in the spring of 1994, to the site of David's death near Da Nang in Vietnam. The book includes a photograph of Victor—once brawny, now bent over a cane—and

Walter walking down the road near the original ambush site; this haunting image provides a poignant bookend to the Westphall family biography and highlights the broader scope of the book: the footprint of war. In *The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial at Angel Fire*, Trout takes on as his specific subject one particular memorial: a stunning white adobe structure in Angel Fire, NM, which was created to honor the memory of David Westphall, to mourn all casualties of war (armed forces and civilians alike), and to project the hope for universal peace. While the focus of Trout's book is localized—on a single monument created out of a unique family tragedy—his narrative becomes a larger story of American tragedy: an elegy about war and its legacy both on man and nation.