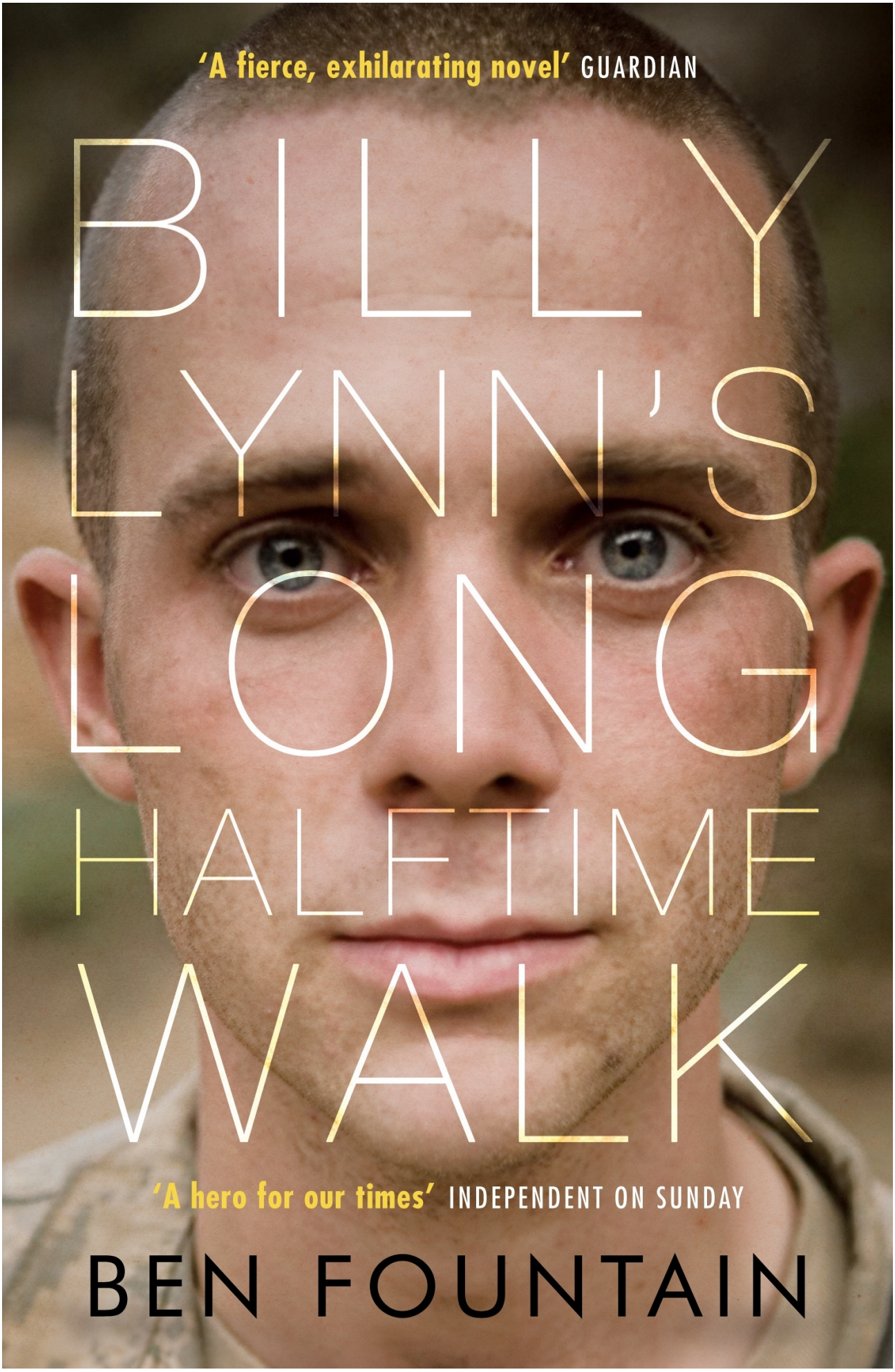
New Review: BRAVO! Ben Fountain Scores a Touchdown on Reality


'A fierce, exhilarating novel' GUARDIAN
BILLY LYNN'S LONG HALFTIME WALK
'A hero for our times' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY
BEN FOUNTAIN

Americans do not genuinely support the troops. This is the impression Ben Fountain's 2012 war novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* left me with. Though American society supports their military in theory, they don't care beyond their own comfort zones. And by comfort zones I mean luxurious *"La-Z-Boy's"* close to the remote for changing the channel as soon as it gets uncomfortable. I am aware that this is a broad and exaggerated statement to make, but Fountain's novel made me question America's supposedly infinite support for its veterans and challenged my assumptions about American patriotism.

When the novel opens, it is Thanksgiving Day at Dallas Cowboy Stadium. The 19-year old Billy Lynn and his fellow Bravo squad members have just finished two weeks of special leave from Iraq for an act of heroism caught on film by a FOX News camera crew. They have been paraded throughout the country to reinforce America's faith in the war, and they will now spend their final day, and the entire novel, at a uniquely American holiday celebrating a uniquely American sport. When the day is over, the eight "Bravo Squad" Soldiers will return to Iraq. Unless—again in uniquely American fashion—they can land a movie deal first. Right away, Fountain's plot reveals how, for America's entertainment elite, the true battle has nothing to do with Iraq. FOX News producers, Cowboy Stadium CEOs, and Hollywood directors do not really want to celebrate these soldiers for who they are or what they did. They would rather celebrate capitalism by fighting each other over who can make most money off these soldiers' traumatic experiences.

Through a close third-person narrative, Fountain gives unfiltered access to an impressive amount of tangled emotions and interactions happening over the course of one single day. Streams of consciousness collide with word-clouds emphasizing words in uncommon ways (e.g., "nina leven", "currj," and "terrRist"). This creates confusion and distracts from things happening outside of Billy's head, but, at the same time,

Billy's intimate and honest inner monologues tied me to the novel. It felt voyeuristic, allowing insight into thoughts far from my reality. Imagining the "overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampoline right down the middle of his hangover," I got the feeling I knew his moods and opinions better than the overcaffeinated "grateful" citizens. Yes, I even almost felt his headache worsen as the manager kept forgetting to get a real twenty-first century "hero"—Advil.

Fountain's decision to name the squad "Bravo" points to the endless thanks given to veterans, handed out as effortlessly as clapping your hands and yelling "Bravo" at overworked stage stars. Like actors, these soldiers wear costumes to fit expectations and re-appear for encores despite being tired after the big show. This thread of superficial gratitude stretches throughout the entire novel, pointing out not only the civilian crowd's thirst for sensation but also their longing for justification. "It was worth it?" they ask Billy. "Don't you think? We had to do it, don't you think?" Billy, having seen the reality, wishes that "just once somebody would call him baby-killer." While doubting the legitimacy of his duties to patrol, shoot and kill, he experiences how society glorifies a soldiers' violent agency. Being celebrated for "the worst day of his life," Billy questions whether the U.S. Army's actions abroad are fully understood and if his fellow citizens even desire to do so. This impression gets reaffirmed when the squad is expected to march onstage unprepared during the Halftime Show. "The explosions start," Billy says, "and they all flinch, boom boom boom, lum rounds are shooting off from somewhere backstage, smokers that explode with the arid crackle of cluster bombs scattering over a wheat field." These cheering fans fail to notice that fireworks might not be as entertaining to veterans as they are to civilians. Nobody bothers to wake Bravo Squad up from this PTSD nightmare.

In addition to the stream of consciousness and word clouds, Fountain provides flashbacks to round out Billy's character.

We find out that Billy might not have even joined the military voluntarily. The reader re-experiences his many moral challenges and choices, and Fountain manages to convey the unfamiliar situation of a teenager who survived frontline battles while still being unsure if he had adequate alternatives besides enlisting. Furthermore, Fountain digs up emotions merely hidden underneath layers of stereotypical masculinity. Lacking role models in his father and community, Billy looks up to his fallen supervisor, the NCO "Shroom," who shared not only advice, but also his final moments with Billy.

Fountain satirizes themes of masculinity and femininity in other moments too. He provocatively reduces manhood to muscles and materialism while minimizing womanhood to sexual temptations. Billy and the other soldiers objectify every female in the novel, infusing the war-hero-trope with the thirsty testosterones of a sexually deprived teenager. Additionally, Fountain critiques America's second biggest source of pride (next to its military): football. When Billy sees the football players' excessive protective equipment, he reasons: "They are among the best-cared for creatures in the history of the planet." So why not "send them just as they are at this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat?" "Send the entire NFL!" he shouts—"Mere bombs and bullets bounce off their bones of steel. Submit, lest our awesome NFL show you straight to the flaming gates of hell." Obviously, Billy, a soldier who has fought for life and death rather than for a championship, does not want autographs.

The author creates a tornado of national pride, suppressed emotions, consumerism, and trauma, and leaves the reader both speechless and yet also asking, "how should we treat veterans?" This, in addition to the jumps from reality to flashback and Billy's constant hangover, makes *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* a stressful read. Fountain provides long build-ups to multiple dramatic turning points, including the movie deal, the return to war, the need for intimacy and the

official “Halftime Show” climax. As a reader, I constantly hoped for success while suspecting failure. Eventually, I began to question society as a whole. I asked myself, if this is true, if society does use solidarity to hide self-absorption, what’s the point of this book? Why put ourselves through this? But Ben Fountain assists the reader at the right moment. He leads us through Billy’s twisted experiences, making sure we stay with the novel, understand its message, and take heart from the experience. Toward the end, Fountain has Billy observe that “his reality is their reality’s bitch.” Those words kicked in like the Advil Billy never got. They made me rethink the fake, oversaturated, and questionable life America and maybe even I call reality, what Fountain describes in another work as the “Fantasy Industrial Complex.”

This book is a stressful one. But this is exactly what makes Billy Lynn a page turner. We bond with Billy faster. His thoughts and feelings stick with us after turning the last page. A worthwhile read, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* changes our perspective of the world, which is what, in my opinion, a war novel should do.