Peter Molin’s Strike Through the Mask!: “So Say We All and the Veterans Writing Workshop”

Justin Hudnall, the founder and director of the San Diego-based performative writing-and-reading collective So Say We All, asked me to lead a Zoom writing workshop for veterans and veteran-affiliated writers. (The event was co-sponsored by The Wrath-Bearing Tree.) I first met Hudnall many years ago at a writing conference and have long admired what he has achieved with So Say We All. Judging from their social media posts, their readings are very well-attended and lively and fun. They are not always centered on veterans writing, but many have

been, and Hudnall has sponsored several writing series specifically for veterans and has published anthologies of vet-writing.

Hudnall asked nice, and I wasn't about to say "no." The thing is, though, I'm not much of a creative writer or a memoirist. I do teach writing, but it's college composition and research papers, not imaginative literature. Nor have I have attended an MFA program. I didn't feel completely unqualified, because I have participated and led vet-writing workshops before. But compared to vet-writers such as Ron Capps, Matt Gallagher, and Tracy Crow, authors with many published books who have led dozens and hundreds of writing classes, I knew I didn't bring much experience or authority to the endeavor. But Hudnall believed in me, and I was intrigued.

One reason I was intrigued is that vet-writing workshops have been huge forces in contemporary war-writing. Organizations such as Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project, Words After War, The War Horse, and Voices from War have been instrumental in helping veterans discover their writing voices, find outlets for publication, and build audiences. Situated structurally midway between isolated amateurs in the hinterlands and professional publication in New York City or elsewhere, writing workshops, along with online vet-writing journals, form the material core of the vet-writing scene.

The evening of my workshop, I logged on to find ten participants waiting. The mix was evenly split between men and women. Two Vietnam vets were in attendance; the others were post-9/11. A few had not served in uniform, but had family members who were vets or had worked for the military. I knew a couple, and learned that several had published before, while others were just beginning their writing journeys. The sub-title of our workshop was "Finding Your Voice," which suggests that it was aimed at beginning writers, but I had prepared writing prompts meant to engage both new and experienced writers, veterans and civilians alike. We had two hours, and

so I had crafted four prompts, thinking we'd probably have time for three, with one in reserve.

The prompts were designed to preclude dark or graphic responses, which was somewhat disingenuous given that's exactly what many vets want to explore in their writing. Still, good work could be done, I thought, helping participants connect physical detail with emotional resonance in regard to less sensational subjects. I allotted fifteen minutes for writing on each subject, with ten-to-fifteen minutes following to discuss and share.

The first prompt I borrowed from a Warrior Writers workshop I had attended: "Write about an article of uniform or piece of equipment that was important to you and still lingers in your memory." I've seen this prompt used in other places, too, and there's even been contests built around the theme. It's also a staple subject of vet social-media threads, so I thought it would be a good one to start with.

I wrote to this prompt alongside the attendees. In truth, I had been thinking about the prompt all day and then wrote my passage an hour or so before the actual workshop. Be that as it may, I wrote about Leatherman utility knives:

When I first joined the Army I noticed that many soldiers more experienced than me carried on their belt not just a jackknife, but a particular kind of multi-purpose tool called a Leatherman. The Leatherman resembled a Swiss Army Knife, but without the elegance of design. Where a Swiss Army knife seems like, well, it was made by Swiss artisans, a Leatherman was dull black and seemed forged out of cheap or leftover tin. It wasn't even all that functional. When I got my hands on one for the first time, I noticed right away that the blade was neither long nor sharp, the bottle and can openers marginally useful, and the scissors and saw functions pathetic. A saw? The only function that seemed like it could be useful were the pliers, but how often was that going to be necessary? Plus,

when I priced a Leatherman in the local military gear store, it seemed very expensive for what you were getting.

But that's the thing—the idea was not to buy a Leatherman with your own money, but to obtain one through your unit supply shop. Leathermans were cool; the soldiers who had them whipped them out with panache and were always all the time finding some little task to do that could only be performed with one of the multitools. And not only did all the cool guys have a Leatherman, they were able to obtain them for free, because they knew someone in supply with whom they had made a deal to get one off-the-books. To actually have to buy a Leatherman was evidence that you weren't yet worthy enough to wield one. If you were a newbie in the unit, not having a Leatherman was a sign of exactly how new you were.

And so it was for the first twenty years of my military career. No Leatherman for me, just ordinary old pocket-knives of one brand or another. But then, in training at Fort Riley prior to deployment to Afghanistan, we drew a lot of personal gear. In fact, we drew gear three times at three different places, and there were individual issues as well. And every time we opened our bag to receive new equipment, the supply guy would drop in a Leatherman. Not once, not twice, not three times. By the time I packed my duffle bags to fly to Afghanistan I had four Leathermans.

I didn't think I was now cool, but something had changed, and things were different.

I shared this vignette and we discussed it for a few minutes. A participant then volunteered to read his vignette, which against my expectations, turned out to be very graphic. I offered comments meant to be supportive while also returning things to a less intense place. Other participants either had not written anything or were not ready to share, so we talked generally about the prompt and writing process.

The second prompt invited participants to write on a trip they had made in the military, or just before or just after. This prompt was inspired by a University of California summer writing-intensive for veterans I had once co-taught. At the writing-intensive, a student-veteran of Chinese-Uighur descent had written about a trip he had made cross-country from Fort Benning, GA, to California after completing his service. His short essay, which described the places and people he had met on this long trip, with the residue of Army-service and his family in China on his mind, had many of us in tears when he read it at our final group event.

I hoped to capture some of this magic, and indeed this prompt was more of a hit than the first one. Most of the attendees either read their vignette or chimed in with comments about memorable military journeys. One vignette described a bus ride while on leave through the wilds of New Jersey and New York. Another described deploying into the Middle East at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom on a military landing craft. I didn't write on this prompt, but read a classic Brian Turner poem, "Night in Blue," about flying home from war:

At seven thousand feet and looking back, running lights

blacked out under the wings and America waiting.

a year of my life disappears at midnight,

the sky a deep viridian, the houselights below

small as match heads burned down to embers….

We only had time for one more prompt, so I posted one that occurred to me from reading the veteran fiction and short-stories: I asked participants to describe a memorable character they had met while in the military. Like the second prompt, this one generated a vibrant response. Everyone either read or spoke about a larger-than-life person they had known in the military. In some cases the vignettes were light-

hearted and affectionate. More seriously, one was about someone who had been important in the author's life at one point but who had since drifted away or perhaps was no longer alive.

As a model for consideration, I deliberated between two vignettes from contemporary novels. One was from Nico Walker's novel *Cherry* in which Walker describes the death of a platoon-mate named Jimenez:

The battle roster number was EAJ-0888, and we were trying to think of who that was. We knew it was a guy from First Platoon because Staff Sergeant White had called it in. We knew it wasn't Specialist Jackson, First Platoon's medic, since line medics weren't attached to Bravo from HHC and if the dead guy were Jackson the battle roster number would have started with HHC and not E. The first initial A wasn't much help was we weren't in the habit of calling one another by our first name. It took us the better part of ten minutes to come up with a guy from Third Platoon whose last name started with the letter J….

The last time I saw him was about eight hours before Haji killed him. He'd been boxing Staff Sergeant Castro in the weight room, sparring, and Castro had popped him on the nose pretty good so his nose was bleeding—not broken or anything, just bleeding….

Jimenez was a cherry….

The other passage was from Stephen Markley's novel *Ohio*. Markley's not a veteran and *Ohio*'s not exactly about the military and war, but two soldiers who fought overseas are central characters. In one place, Markley describes a group of soldiers reminiscing about a deceased comrade named Greg Coyle who referred to everything as a "MacDougal," as in "Bring that MacDougal over here" or "And then this MacDougal said….":

When they stood for inspections, Dan, like everyone, would get

ripped, maybe because he'd stored his compression bandages in the wrong place or always tried to get away with not wearing the side plates of his body armor (those heavy, awkward five-by-five bastards). Greg Coyle, no matter how goofy he was, never got ripped, was always on point. Coyle, who referred to everything as a "MacDougal." A bore snake, pliers, a target at the range, military-age males, MREs, ops, battalion—they were all just MacDougals to him. To the dismay of the whole company, within weeks of their deployment everyone was saying it.

"We're getting those up-armored MacDougals next month."

"Those powdered MacDougals—goddamn! Better than Mom's homemade MacDougal."

"That other MacDougal was getting rocked by IEMacDougals."

They landed in Iraq in 2006, when the country was no joke, but that joke worked right through rocket attacks and EFPs.

The second thing Dan did after he got out and visited Rudy in the hospital was attend Bren Della Terza's wedding in Austin, Texas. A lot of his friends from Iraq were there, guys he hadn't seen in a while because they'd gotten out after two tours. Badamier, Lieutenant Holt, Cleary, Wong, Doc Laymon, Drake in his wheelchair, "Other James" Streiss, now with two robot hands. They of course got drunk and began referring to everything as a "MacDougal," annoying the hell out of those piqued Texas bridesmaids. Decent, churchgoing women who had never seen soldiers cut loose. How hilariously stupid they could be. In his buzz, Dan found himself wishing to return to 2006, to be back on patrol with his friends.

Ultimately, I chose the *Ohio* passage; the death of Jimenez passage from *Cherry* is fantastic but also both graphic and full of Army infantry jargon I was not sure everyone would get.

At this point, nearing the end, everyone except one participant had shared at least one vignette. This last participant now volunteered to read his passage in response to the first prompt, about a piece of military equipment. As he read, I could see why he had hesitated at first. The piece was brooding and complex; the piece of equipment was intimately connected with a serious family event, but widely separated by the passage of time. For such a short piece, it really packed a punch; it was both very moving and also very accomplished. I was glad the author shared it with us, and I hope he finds means to share it more widely in the future.

And with that our time was up. "You're up, you're moving, you're down," as we used to say in the Army to describe the quickness with which infantry soldiers must pop up-and-down when charging against enemy fire. I didn't offer many pearls of writing wisdom, nor tips for professional success. The main thing was to make the event absorbing in the moment. Writing is an individualistic endeavor at heart, but I wanted to convey how meaningful writing can also be inspired by the company of sympathetic fellow authors.

As I reflected on the event in the days following, I realized I had not availed myself of two very worthy vet-writing handbooks: Ron Capps' *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story* (2011) and Tracy Crow's *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story* (2015). Both are full of sensible advice, inspiring examples, and creative writing prompts. *Writing War* includes many excerpts from classic and contemporary published war-writing, while *On Point* offers more personal modeling of how the events of one's life might be transformed into memorable prose relatable to all. But each is highly recommended.

So, to end, thank you Justin Hudnall. Other workshops in the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree series have been led by Andria Williams, Abbey Murray, and Halle Shilling. I don't know Shilling, but I can vouch that Williams and Murray are

both authors and teachers with much to offer students and emerging writers.

Another author in the war-writing scene, Jesse Goolsby, once wrote, “There are blank pages in front of us all. If one wants a different war story then go write it, and I wish you well.” I like the spirit of that, and I hope that the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree collaboration continues. Here’s to all the leaders of vet-writing workshops and to all who participate in them.

Works mentioned in this article:

Ron Capps, *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. CreateSpace, 2011.

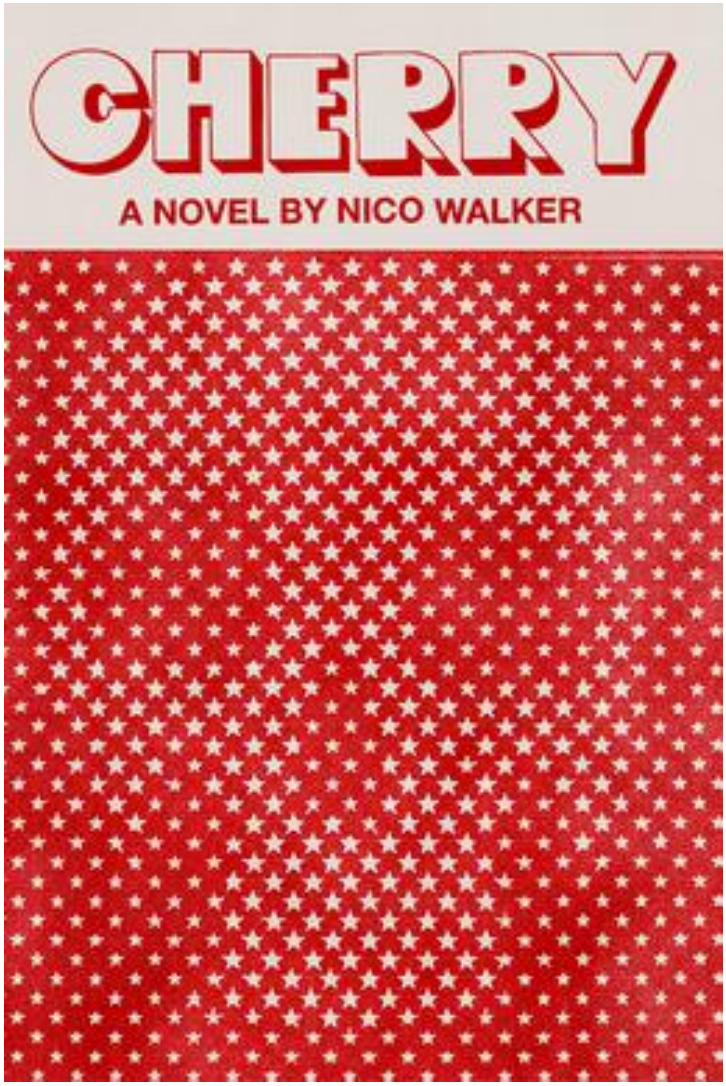
Tracy Crow: *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*. Potomac, 2015.

Stephen Markley, *Ohio*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

Brian Turner, “Night in Blue,” *Here, Bullet*. Alice James, 2005.

Nico Walker, *Cherry*. Knopf, 2018.

New Review from Michael Carson: “Cherry” by Nico Walker



Early on in Nico Walker's *Cherry*, the narrator, working a dead-end shoe store job to pay for drugs while his parents pay for his college, says that he has a well cultivated sense of shame. This is true. He does. Many people do not. Many people are shameless. They do not care how they degrade themselves as long as society says it's okay to degrade themselves in this way. Or they are full of shame in an uncultivated way. It just spills out here and there, at rare moments, when they let their guard down. It makes you wonder if they even care about their shame. If they too are shameless as those that are shameless.

That would make everyone shameless except for Nico Walker. I think this might very well be true. I think only Nico Walker feels shame. He is the only writer from the recent wars that I've read who has taken his shame and cultivated it to such a

degree that it is impossible not to be ashamed of the Iraq War (or whatever the journalists and historians are calling it now).

He makes you ashamed of your country. He makes you ashamed of yourself. He makes you ashamed of being alive.

It's glorious. *Cherry* is an absolute delight. I have not had this much fun reading a book in a very long time.

Maybe it's because Nico Walker robbed a bunch of banks. Maybe it's because Nico Walker was a bad soldier. Maybe it is because Walker had a "bad" war (whatever that means). Maybe it is because Walker was a junkie. Maybe it is because Walker is actually funny. Maybe it is because Walker can write. Or maybe it's all these bound into one. Maybe the urge to make it about one or another is to miss the point. It shows a terribly uncoordinated sense of shame. It is maybe, even, a little shameless.

So I kind of love this book. Walker's narrator doesn't play fuck fuck games (as they used to say in Ranger school, one of those schools that train us to kill better, to play roles better, to take pride in shamelessness). He gets straight to the point. He knows the ending. Death, indignity, compromise. The ending, as he says, is fucked.

Here he is talking about Emily, the woman that provides a strange and mysterious through-line in the novel, which feels, at times, to be more of a fantasy than anything else, the idea of a woman we might imagine for ourselves but also, miraculously, a woman who insists on being herself:

"The day I met her we went for a walk after class and we ended up in her dorm room. We talked for a while there and then for whatever reason I got to crying, like really bawling-my-fucking-eyes-out crying. I'd already seen everything that was going to happen and it was a nightmare. Something like that. And she was really sweet to me. I don't think there was ever

anyone who felt more compassion for weak motherfuckers.”

Whoever Emily is, whatever her fictional or physical reality, I love her too. I love this compassion. I love the fact that she disappears and then reappears mysteriously under sewer grates. That she follows the narrator through the war and then into drugs and his life of crime and that she puts ice on his crotch before his final robbery that sends him (and Nico himself) to eight years in jail. That she is always cursing. That she is fucked up, that she sees that it is fucked up, all of it, yet somehow, she still has compassion for a man who says (idiotically, perversely, criminally), “I take all the beautiful things to heart and they fuck my heart until I about die from it.”

She is an ending that is not an ending. She is the possibility of a person. He tries to be good for her. Not jerk off to anyone but her. Not sleep around. Keep her high. He tries to be decent in a world that is not, that cannot be, that does not care about beauty, that does not want to die from beauty so dies all the time, forever and ever.

Mid-deployment, between one succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders and the next succession of pointless deaths and mutilations and murders, the narrator and other soldiers watch pornography and see that the “unsuspecting” woman wears a wedding ring and that the reality TV pornography is not reality TV pornography.

The narrator says:

“And we know then that life was just a murderous fuckgame and that we had been dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.”

If we don’t have compassion for the weak, for those who don’t have a choice and those who make bad choices, we have nothing.

Or not nothing. Not exactly. We still have Staff Sergeant North.

North looks like Morrisey. North is from Idaho. North is a killer. He grows to hate the narrator for being incompetent. For being, deep down, a faker. Not a soldier. North disappears from the narrative. But we are told that he survives the war unscathed, that he goes on to bigger and better things. Killers often do.

The narrator is not a killer. It kills him.

He's a medic, though. A bad one. Here's the narrator trying and failing to save an Iraqi that his squad accidentally murdered for leaving his own house at night.

"I should have packed the haji full of gauze, I should have kept packing the wound til I couldn't pack it anymore, til 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 on my helmet because he could go into shock if his feet weren't propped up that way. 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. The haji's eyes rolled up in his head and then came back, focused again, rolled up again. I said I was going to give him morphine to keep him from going into shock.

North said, 'Do what you have to do, doc. You don't have to tell us.'

I gave the haji morphine, so I could look like I was doing something right. I stuck him on his right thigh and went back to working on a line. His arm was thin. I couldn't get a flash. Then I got a flash, but he moved and I lost it.

I said, 'Keep still, you fuck! I'm trying to help you.'

North said, 'Be quiet, doc.'"

The narrator does not listen to North. The narrator is not a professional. He cries. He yells. He makes jokes. He commits

crimes. He goes crazy. He counts his failures one by one, lovingly, like someone with a well cultivated sense of shame. Like Jerry in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" (which provides the epigraph to one of Walker's sections), the narrator won't shut up, won't not fall on his own knife. He is going North from the zoo. To tell his zoo story. Our story. That life is very often a murderous fuck game and that we are almost always dumb enough to fall for some bullshit.

So. This being a fact. What do we do with this? Where do we go from here?

We might laugh at flying babies. Before deployment, the narrator is put in charge of a recruitment "rockwall" in Ohio somewhere. Parents hand him babies and the babies don't weigh enough for the pullies, so they just fly up to the top of the rockwall. The narrator doesn't know what to do but the parents keep on handing him babies. He straps them up and away they go.

We could also, perhaps, be crushed by the beauty of it all, as the narrator often is. This, remember, is what makes him a weak motherfucker in the first place.

Here is Emily and the narrator getting fake married for real extra benefits. She's wearing some kind of gas station attendant uniform and his nose is swollen from a friend's headbutt:

"And we knew at that moment we were the two most beautiful things in the world. How long it lasted, I don't know, but it was true for at least a few minutes. Six billion people in the world and no one had it on us."

Vonnegut once said that there are billions of people in this world and that he supposes they all want dignity.

They do. They do. And sometimes they even get it.

Vonnegut also said remember the nice moments.

Here’s a nice moment from Iraq:

“One time the prisoners all sang together and you could hear them outside the jail and it was very beautiful and it made you feel like an asshole.”

I feel like an asshole after reading this book.

It’s okay. Sometimes it is good to feel like an asshole. Sometimes we need to remember we are assholes. How else could we ever stop being one?

There’s been a lot of controversy lately about the book and the movie and instagram photos. Some say that Walker didn’t write it. Or he doesn’t deserve this after what he did or didn’t do. Blah blah blah. The internet keeps on handing us babies. Away the babies go.

The question is this: Do we want a hero? Or do you want a novelist? I for one have had enough of heroes. Bring on more Nico Walkers. If only because Nico Walker cares about how he degrades himself. He is sensitive to his degradation and the different ways that each one of us degrade ourselves on a daily basis. He lives it, understands it. I would not recommend this way of being to anyone else but Nico Walker. I wouldn’t even recommend it to Nico Walker (not all the time anyway). But I’m glad we got this book out of it. Because that war was fucked. And we should be ashamed.